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OXFORD AMERICAN

THE BATTLE
OF AND FOR THE BLACK FACE BOY
BY NIKKY FINNEY

CROSSING OVER:
JONATHAN BLITZER
REPORTS FROM EL PASO

FICTION BY CATHERINE LACEY
AND JAMIE QUATRO

ANSEL ELKINS, BETH ANN FENNELLY, CARSON McCULLERS, PADGETT POWELL,
FRANK STANFORD, AND THE LEGEND OF CHOKOLOSKEE



FALL 2015





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Southern MUSIC ISSUE

FEATURING

GEORGIA

★ ★ ★

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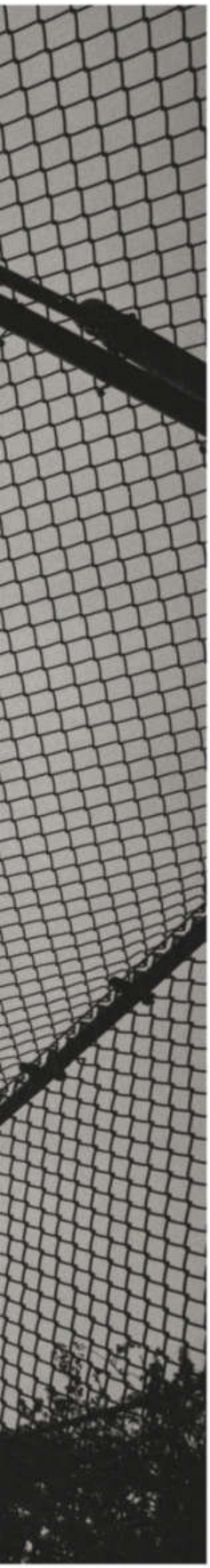
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AMERICAN



Cover:
"Here" (2013), by RaMell Ross

This Page:
"Flying Dream" (1972), by Arthur Tress

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"My Sister's Bedroom," Ithaca, New York (2004). Photo by Doug DuBois

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Hank's Dream

BY JOHN LINGAN

Hank Deane walked out of Berry Field airport in Nashville and had to shield his eyes from the glare bouncing off Claude Hill's Lincoln convertible. Deane was nineteen years old, wide-eyed and slight of frame, and he'd never been to Music City before, though June 22, 1974, was an excellent time to arrive. That very day, Waylon Jennings's "This Time" hit No. 1 on the Country Singles chart, replacing Charlie Rich's "I Don't See Me in Your Eyes Anymore"—the outlaw and Nashville sounds were neck and neck, the audience only growing for both. But Hank didn't have much use for either. He was in town to tap a deeper vein.

Earlier in the decade, a wave of traditionalists had cropped up—all acoustic, proudly backward-looking. Groups like J. D. Crowe and the New South, Old and in the Way, the Seldom Scene, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band reclaimed Flatt & Scruggs's lightning tempos and Ralph Stanley's rolling clawhammer banjo, added their own sense of hippie adventurousness, and arrived at a style that one of the era's other major acts took for their own name: New Grass Revival.

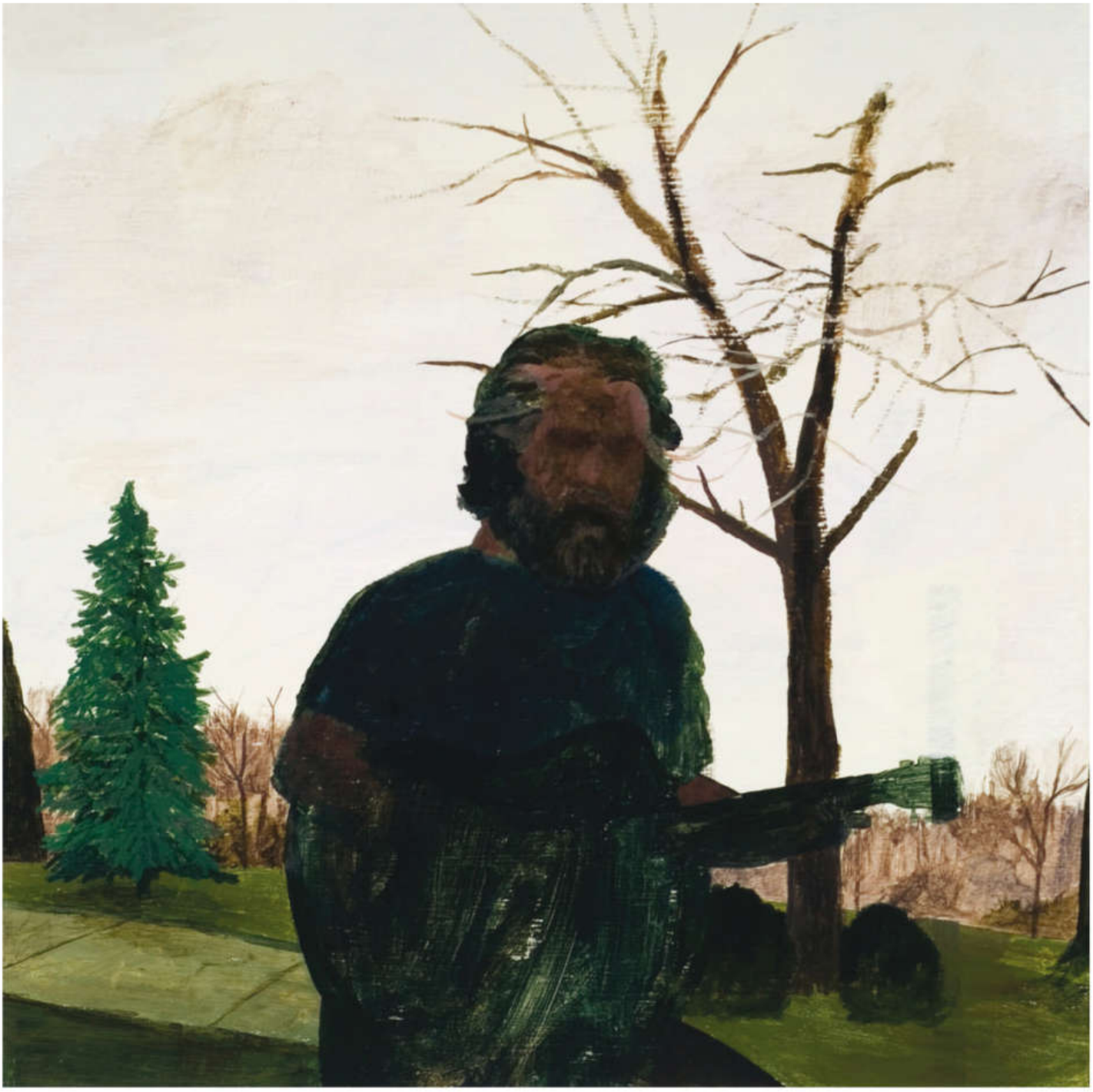
No one embodied the genre's ascension like the young Hank Deane. Three years earlier, he'd been an aspiring blues guitarist in the Philadelphia suburbs, so devoted that his father once drove him up to Queens so that Hank could live and study with Reverend Gary Davis for a weekend. He soon became a fixture at The Main Point, a famed Bryn Mawr coffeehouse and folk hub, and that's where he first saw David Bromberg, session man for Dylan's *Self Portrait* and *New Morning* and a hundred other things. In the liner notes for his first solo album, Bromberg thanked songwriter John Hartford for lending his band, and based only on that little hat-tip, Hank tracked down Hartford's 1971 bluegrass record, *Aereo-Plain,* which Bromberg had produced. When Hank heard that album, it was as if his sputtering engine finally caught. Suddenly his life was in motion.

The *Aereo-Plain* band contained some of the era's greatest roots-music talent. On dobro, playing with bouncy, acrobatic flair, was the veteran Tut Taylor. On lead guitar, flatpicking with unparalleled clarity and rhythmic drive, was Norman Blake, who had first met Hartford on *The Johnny Cash Show,* where Blake played in the house band. The hero of the group was Vassar Clements, the Florida-born fiddle player who had originated a style he deemed "hillbilly jazz." On Hank's favorite song, the breezy "Steamboat Whistle Blues," and throughout *Aereo-Plain,* Clements's fiddle is like that cartoon bluebird alighting on Uncle Remus's finger—every time he plays, it's a burst of otherworldly color, a clarion voice flying in to deliver you from your troubles.

Hank quickly became an acolyte of Hartford's brand of beatnik pothead Appalachia. He traveled to the regional bluegrass happenings that were popping up all over, such as Indiana's famed Bean Blossom Festival, and he got Blake, Clements, and Taylor booked at the Main Point. But that wasn't nearly enough exposure for Hank, so he started making calls. Eventually, he managed to set up a gig at the Philadelphia Academy of Music, "a dream bill for bluegrass and country fanatics," as the local *Evening Bulletin* described it. April 7, 1974: Hartford, Bromberg, Blake, Clements, Taylor, and the English bassist Dave Holland, late of Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* as well as Hartford's *Aereo-Plain* follow-up, *Morning Bugle.* They filled all 3,000 seats and people were still lined up around the block. The show lasted more than three hours, with pristine sound by Elvis's preferred road sound team at the time, the Clair Brothers. The audience swung from rapt attention to hysterical applause throughout the night. Everyone onstage made a small bundle of money, and Hank walked away with several grand of his own. Not bad for a night with his heroes.

The musicians were so energized by the experience that Hank received a standing invitation to make a record with the group in Nashville, using *Aereo-Plain*'s engineer, Claude Hill. He didn't wait. Two months later he was on a plane, then found himself in the Tennessee sun, riding shotgun in Hill's Lincoln, bound for Hound's Ear Studio on Music Row and a session with newgrass royalty.

Hank Deane didn't answer the door immediately when I went to meet him late last year. He'd warned me to knock hard since chances were he'd be playing his fiddle or his guitar inside, lost in a reverie. I banged a few times with my palm, peered in through the curtainless kitchen windows, and decided to walk up the small hill nearby to wait for him. For more than a decade, Hank has lived alone in a two-bedroom apartment above a barn near Unionville, about an hour west of Philadelphia and fifteen miles north of the Mason-Dixon line. It was a Saturday in November, and in the quiet of late afternoon I could hear only the soft chill wind and the carried conversation of two Spanish-speaking bricklayers working on the other end of the property. Then came the wild crack and echo of the landlord's rifle as he took target practice



from a spot near the farmhouse porch a couple hundred yards away. Then Hank's door opened and he called out my name.

He looked youthful but weary: a smooth, leonine face framed by wispy hair and saucer-sized ears, his smile cocked off to one side like a shy teenager's. But his shoulders were pulled in high, as if he'd been cold even indoors, and his brown eyes seemed tired. Rightfully so; Hank's fifty-nine now, and five days a week he rises at 4:30 A.M. to check the Pennsylvania substitute teacher listings, signing up for whichever gig is closest. Sometimes it's down the road, sometimes it's an hour away. He loves the kids, and relishes playing some small positive role in their adolescence, a time he remembers well. But it's a hard job, uncertain and not at all lucrative, and many days he comes home too exhausted to play the small collection of string instruments that he stores on the living room couch.

Inside, as we entered the kitchen, I noticed a cardboard box full of shrink-wrapped CDs on the floor, representing the only commercially available copies of the record that Hank produced as a music-drunk teenager in Nashville forty years prior. It was named, simply, for its seven legendary session men: *Norman Blake/Tut Taylor/Sam Bush/Butch Robins/Vassar Clements/David Holland/Jethro Burns,* though Hank refers to it as "The HDS Session," after the label he created to release it. He took his initials, added an S to sound professional ("like CBS Records"), and randomly listed the album as

"Fare Forward Home" (2007), by Joseph Noderer

HDS-701 when it came out in September 1975, distributed by Flying Fish Records, the label that released *Aereo-Plain.* There was never to be an HDS-702. And in fact, The HDS Session, though popular, went out of print surprisingly quickly. Hank, lifelong owner of the album rights and the session tapes themselves, had it digitally remastered in 2004 and sold the CD himself. That went out of print, too, and I only learned of it after my own *Aereo-Plain* obsession led me to a lone track on YouTube, which has since been removed. Last summer, I contacted Hank to find out why it was so hard to get a copy of such a unique record—one of the newgrass genre's most talent-heavy and adventurous documents. He was proud of the sudden attention, which was enough to compel him to press a few hundred more CDs, which you can find on Amazon right now for $17.98 plus shipping. As of November, when I visited, he'd sold a few dozen.

I was eager to listen to the album with Hank, but he proposed that we take a stroll. He grabbed his knit hat and we set off down the graveled main drive and turned right, farmland stretching out on either side. "I love this walk," he said, breathing in deeply. Every passing truck stopped so neighbors could say hello to him. He was friendly and attentive to everyone, though we quickly pressed onward so he could tell me everything he needed to say about the afternoon that was, by his own repeated admission, the high point of his life.

"Everybody was at the very top of their abilities. Nobody was sick yet. Later on there'd be cancer," he told me. "But on that Saturday everybody was feeling good, and everybody had prepared for it. They came in loaded for bear. All these miracles were happening. It was a perfect day. The sun was shining, and it was amazing."

On an album of ambitious, genre-blending acoustic music, the second track, "Sauerkraut 'N Solar Energy," stands out in both name and aspect. The bouncy blues was composed on the spot, based on an idea that had come to Hank in a dream. The band followed his lead. "I said, 'It starts with Dave and then everyone comes in, then everyone drops out and Dave brings it back double-time,'" he told me. "And they did it in one take! It was brilliant!" Such was the confidence, cohesion, and spirit of spontaneity in the room that day, which began a little after 2 P.M., an early session by musicians' standards.

Norman Blake showed up first, with a battered guitar case and his new girlfriend, Nancy. A quiet man from Sulphur Springs, Georgia, Blake had been playing music professionally since 1954, when he dropped out of school at sixteen. He'd played the *Tennessee Barndance,* a famed regional radio program, then was stationed at the Panama Canal, where he led a bluegrass trio. When he returned home he played guitar for hire before joining June Carter's road band, and it was a short jump to her husband's TV show. By the early Seventies, he'd hooked up with John Hartford and made a couple solo albums. By 1974, Norman Blake had one of the most graceful and powerful right wrists in all of American guitar playing.

Dave Holland had traveled down with his wife from their home in upstate New York. It was their first road trip through the Deep South, and they'd done it leisurely, stopping at every chance and marveling at everyone's hospitality and openness. By the time they reached Nashville, Holland was beatific, amazed that his bass playing had taken him from the postwar English Midlands to the swirl of Miles Davis's most boundary-defying period, and now to a Nashville session with some of the greatest American roots players alive.

Hartford had disinvited himself, for reasons nobody knew. And Sam Bush had invited his idol, Jethro Burns, of the legendary duo Homer & Jethro, and the New Grass Revival guitarist Butch Robins. Along with Vassar Clements, who arrived midway through the afternoon after playing a gig, and Tut Taylor, there were seven men who shared a broad knowledge of "old-time" music, but few singers or songwriters among them. The common thread, highlighted by the unexpected addition of a jazz bassist, was improvisation: more than anything, each man in Hound's Ear Studio was a master at pulling a melody out of the air.

With that in mind, the music quickly spiraled away from strict country. They tore through the first couple songs, "Sweet Georgia Brown," the old ragtime standard best known as the Harlem Globetrotters theme, and "Going Home," featuring a melody lifted from Dvorak's New World Symphony. Blake recorded an astonishingly fleet-fingered solo piece, "The Old Brown Case," that pushed and pulled at different time signatures. Tut Taylor offered up "Oconee," named for the river near his childhood home in Georgia, which the group worked up into a minor-key cross between a Spaghetti Western soundtrack and a gypsy march.

"They all seemed together by ear," according to Nancy Blake, who later became Norman's wife and longtime musical partner. She was in Hound's Ear purely as a spectator that day. "It was the first time I'd ever seen hillbilly string musicians hit that Charles Mingus headspace. I knew there was music coming into the world that had never been in it before."

Saturday afternoon in nashville.
me and norman and all the rest of them gathered together in hound's ear studio and played music. we are here because of our shared desire to record together. spontaneous and free!

Hank's original liner notes, written afterward in Philadelphia, are beautifully youthful and autobiographical. Even though he wouldn't dare pick up an instrument among such a rarefied crew, his fingerprints were all over the record. He'd insisted that the album's title and cover mimic the spare, clean-line look of ECM Records, the progressive German jazz label. And the final song, "Vassar & Dave," a blues duet improv featuring his favorite players, Holland and Clements, was his idea. "A bass and a fiddle—that kind of thing had never happened anywhere," he said.

So when The HDS Session came out, it belonged as much to Hank as any of the men on the cover. It was his excitement that had led to such a generation-spanning supergroup, many of whom had not recorded together before or since. It was Hank who gave them ideas and song titles and eventually doled out their royalties. And while it was just another session, albeit a memorable one, for these veteran players, it was something more powerful for Hank.

"It gave me a sense of immortality, and freedom," he told me on our walk. It was as if "all of the good that I was experiencing was permanent—no one could destroy it. I wouldn't have to worry about death or dying. I was overwhelmed by it."

The record was a musical success and a seemingly popular one as well, though the checks that Flying Fish sent didn't reflect the excitement that audiences showed the musicians during the concerts of the time. And proud as he was that his album turned out so well, Hank didn't have any designs on a further career. As Dave Holland, who remains close with Hank, told me, "He's kind of an innocent in a certain way. He doesn't have a grand plan. He's going through life and learning what he can."

On Holland's recommendation, Hank enrolled at the New England Conservatory in the early Eighties to study the upright bass. "I was not a wunderkind," he explained to me. "I could listen to something and learn to play it,

but I could never improvise like Dave does." Nevertheless, he earned his degree and then took a series of short-lived jobs: piano tuner, gas station attendant, car wash employee. He played music along the way, leading a jazz trio as a guitarist and opening for touring acts at Philadelphia's Chestnut Cabaret. And he produced two subsequent albums—one in 1985 featuring Hartford, Holland, and Vassar Clements, and another a few years later with Clements, Holland, and the jazz legends John Abercrombie and Jimmy Cobb. But his love for music never quite cohered into a career, and soon enough the decades passed, visiting upon Hank his share of the universe's troubles and sadness—his supportive parents died, he saw romance come and go, his heroes and friends succumbed to old age and sickness, and he had health scares of his own.

As the sun fell, he grew philosophical, sharing the kinds of thoughts that come to people as they stare at a screen at 4:30 A.M., hoping the day's work will appear. "People eat and they reproduce and they raise the children, and you spend all your time getting the money to put the food down your throat. And it's pretty fucking monotonous. And the whole economic system and society we've got in place, it drives you right into the ground." His voice rose, and he paused to calm down. "I didn't understand this growing up, because I was protected. I'm finding it out now."

Certain record labels have expressed an interest in giving The HDS Session a proper reissue, maybe even releasing the Philadelphia concert as well. Hank has the tapes to do all of it, and such an arrangement might help him put a dent in the debt he's accrued. But it's hard to trust a record company to do honor to your legacy, your most precious memories. So for now it's only available by mail, direct from a barn in Unionville, Pennsylvania. Hank still sends royalties, even if only a few cents, to every living musician on the record. He has control over this one tiny corner of the world, and he is devoted to proper stewardship of it.

Back in his living room, darkness falling outside, Hank ran a finger over a hardcover set of Van Gogh's complete works. "I tried to fit in but I never did," he reflected. "I always ran to music. I spent most of my time with music, trying to learn to play the guitar, trying to learn to play the fiddle, and loving every minute." Hank continued, and we talked about his life after the record, his family, but he kept coming back to the music. "If you weren't here I'd be playing."

A little before midnight, the group convened in the Hound's Ear control room to listen back to the day's best takes. The mood was high; the musicians picked through each other's cases and admired each other's instruments, especially Dave Holland's shockingly valuable upright bass and Jethro Burns's red Florentine-style mandolin. But when the recordings played, silence descended on the room. They'd all agreed that the session had gone well, but the music was even fuller and wilder than they'd experienced around the microphones. In Nancy Blake's words, "There wasn't a lot of yeah-yeah."

Outside, everyone had a hug for Hank Deane, who suddenly stood among his heroes as an equal. They sung the day's praises a while longer, then scattered into the Nashville night. Hank had learned what life could be, and he skipped down 17th Avenue with a line from e.e. cummings in mind, something Holland had shown him earlier that day: "Miracles are to come. With you I leave a remembrance of miracles." He was nineteen years old. He loved music. He couldn't imagine a better friend.





The Cork

BY PADGETT POWELL

I make a good firm precise cut with the razor blade into the cork, from one side of the cork to the longitudinal axis. The cork is a segment of a cone, the diameter of one end approximately twice that of the other end, both ends flat. I am too stupid to know the name of this geometric figure and too stupid to know offhand, or even with industry, where to find out the name. "With industry" is some kind of vagueness by which I might mean crossing the room and getting the dictionary and then not knowing what to look up—cone? cork? I might mean a call to the reference desk at the library and then having to stammer, "Do you know how old-fashioned fishing corks were shaped, actually also the corks that were put into bottles as stoppers which were larger at one end than the other so that they *stopped* before going into the bottle?" And if I could get an affirmative, I would then say, "Well, what is the figure of this cork called? I need to know."

At this point the librarian would not say, "Why do you need to know?" as he, or indeed she, might want to but would be prevented from by a consideration of professionalism.

So I would not be able to say, "Oh, you know, so if I were to try to write about cutting one of these corks for the purpose of inserting into it some fishing line, I would not have to waste a lot of words in an awkward and tedious and probably unserving description of the kind of cork I am talking about, I could just name it with the obscure geometer's term that no one would know the meaning of and be done with it, and given that no one understood what kind of cork I was talking about anyway, in the absence of the long imprecise description at least he could get on with it. And there is a certain kind of person who might be bothered by not knowing the term for the cork and he might

"Interior Landscape (Book)," by Dawn Roe

himself, if he was this kind of person, and if he was sufficiently bothered by it, go to the dictionary, but there is the other sort of person who would be unbothered by not knowing the term and just breeze on, gratified, perhaps even unconsciously, but gratified nonetheless, that he did not have to wade through the vague and tedious description of the cork which leaves him no better informed of it than the proper name which eludes him but which, the fumbling description, requires of him considerable time in the reading thereof."

The librarian I am not going to call might, yes, be a woman, and may I say here that perhaps the most beautiful woman I have ever seen is a reference librarian? A woman so beautiful that men decline the opportunity to speak to her at all, and indeed one whom I am not at complete liberty to speak to in all the ways I might wish to speak to her, by which I mean only of course all the ways, or some of the ways, chiefly the intimate ways, that a man might be expected to want to speak to a woman he regards as the most beautiful he has ever seen.

Into the cork I press the monofilament fishing line, by holding a length of it tightly as one holds dental floss and pressing it into the razored slit that describes a plane to the longitudinal center of the cork—there we've been through that quite enough I think. Now we have something to behold. We have this cork, handsome in its lines whatever they may be actually called: a nice set of circles (two) and diagonals (two in transection or 360 of them if you elected to conceive of one line per degree) connecting them, the larger end of the cork fluting down to the other, or the smaller flaring up to the larger, as you choose. The cork's surface has its agreeable mottle, its imperfections adding up to the sense of a perfect imperfectness, a phenomenon in nature (viz marble, for example) that we find very pleasing—you know, rose-moles all in stipple upon trout and glory be to God for dappled things, old Hopkins was all over it. Alas, we have the humble, brindled cork, only a piece of tree bark actually, but a piece of bark machined into the demi-cone with its precision, even if our vocabulary lacks the precision to name it, and through the cork now penetrating the center of one end and emerging from the center of the other end a fine plastic line, whether greenish or bluish always suggestive of water in its color, this string from the laboratory running precisely through this thing which floats taken from the side of a tree.

Why am I on about this cork and its new alien, plastic axis? Well, for one thing, as you



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EMPEROR

can tell, I find something aesthetically pleasing about its construction, its antinomies, its little ironies, even its indictment of my intellectual fundament, or perhaps I mean my epistemological grasp, by which I might mean my sense that that summer-school course in geometry following the tenth grade, which might serve as a symbol for my education entire, was not adequate. For another, this cork sits here in its pleasing contrasts telling me I might even go fishing. There, fishing, with cork upright and approximately one half submerged, in the slim event—it is the modern world—a fish takes it down, it will displace water to a greater degree as it sinks and then upon actual submersion the water will close over the larger plane of its top with considerable force and effect a very agreeable little snap or pop, and this sound—coupled with the undiluted boyhood thrill of *game on* and the enduring surprise of seeing the cork *disappear*—will startle me in a finite and uncomplicated and most pleasing way. Something more involved and more mundane may ensue—a fish one does not want, a fish injured one does not wish to injure, one's bait robbed, etc.—but the moment of the cork in the water at the ready is pure. I have no need, however, of taking it fishing: I have the cork with the line through it, and that is enough. It is itself, a thing I have made. It is there. It does not bode complications. It is not a telephone, say, that is going to ring. It does not contain an assault upon me of the world and my dim access unto it.

I could now freely call the most beautiful reference librarian in the world and not ask the name of the figure of the cork. I could say, "I have a thing I do not need trouble you with the naming of. I remember you from a party. I saw you and was struck by you. You could be making a living with your looks, professionally, I mean, and I trust you do not think I am being vulgar, though I suppose I am. Let it be: I am vulgar. You could be comfortable and famous by contriving to let men, and women, look at you, as opposed to not being comfortable or famous and having men call you up and ask you the name of the figure of the cork they might be wasting their little lives playing with. I saw you and was struck by you to such a degree that the obviousness of carnality went right by us as I stepped up and talked to you, openly and cleanly, except for the fact that I correctly noticed that no other men were stepping up to talk to you because they were stuck in the carnality of their imaginings of you. You bring that on in a mortal, you effing librarian. It is just that I am a little past mortal, or not yet there. I have no doubt been there—there was a time I would have run from the room as other men, or stepped up and proposed intercourse in some properly masked fashion, but now I have reached the cork stage. I have this cork here, it is not a phone that is going to ring—and even when I say that I see a comparatively agreeable Bakelite phone of the Forties with a rotary dial and five-digit numbers and a live operator you might know the first name of, not the instrument of complex tumor-bearing mind-scattering hell that a phone represents today—I have this cork, I don't have you, I want this cork, I might want you."

That would be okay, saying that, not unlike seeing the cork go down, before the ensuing mundane complications of the catch or the repudiation, the tangle of lives, the impure disentangling that is always necessary and never final.

From *Cries for Help, Various,* by Padgett Powell, published by Catapult in September.



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My Name Is Alex

BY MICHELLE GARCÍA

A boy stood along the highway, his desperation made plain by the way he leaned into the oncoming traffic, flapping his arms while gripping a plastic water jug covered in dust. After the cars rushed past him, ignoring his calls for help, the boy spun around in defeat, his legs nearly buckling beneath him. I watched from the side of the road, at a distance. He spotted another car and began bouncing on his feet, mustering the energy for his next attempt. The boy couldn't understand why people weren't stopping. He only needed to get to Houston but he didn't know that Houston was nearly three hundred miles away.

The Texas borderlands lay 100 miles to the south. Nothing but brush lay for miles around him, nothing but beautiful Texas ranch land, where nearly all living things were born to prick, sting, or bite.

The drivers knew who he was—or rather, what he was. The filthy clothes, the jug of water, the pitiful desperation. They violently jerked their pickup trucks and cars out of his way. These were church-going people, people who say grace before dinner and bid farewell with the words, *que vayas con Dios* (go with God). Their pickups and cars might well display a fish-shaped decal, identical to the one affixed to my tailgate, containing the word JESUS.

In the evenings, as the land cools, television news reports tell of the latest migrant body found on one of the South Texas ranches. With hundreds of men, women, and children turning up dead each year, the reports have become regular news items. Death is generally blamed on heat or exposure. The TV anchors never mention whether anyone might have seen the migrants on the road and left them to die. They never mention whether the migrant succumbed to indifference and fear.

But reporters often seem to relish offering the particulars of a migrant's death, the state of undress, the effects of decomposition. Such details, of a fate too horrific to imagine for friends and loved ones, work to push these strangers further into the realm of *them.* That's what almost everyone calls the migrants: *them.* No qualifier or definition needed. I directed my disgust not at the boy but at the passing traffic.

After a few minutes, the boy began turning in circles, falling into an obvious despair. To reach this part of the highway, he had traveled through an empire, the King Ranch, with a landmass greater than Rhode Island. In a day or two, if he continued his journey, the rattlesnakes would get him, or the heat. If he dared return to the brush, the tangle of trees, bushes, and cacti would envelop him, trapping humidity and heat, which by late morning reaches triple digits even in September. The air is stifling, the earth beneath is a rocky sand. There are no straight paths through the cat's claws, cacti, and the palms known as Spanish daggers.

I was just a few years younger than the boy when my brother and I got lost in the brush while playing a game of explorer. We heard the horn of the old pickup bleating over and over as my father tried to find us. And I remember the terrified look on his face when he did. That afternoon, I learned that death lurks out in the brush, even for children.

Lessons from the ranch tend to form deep grooves in my memory because they involve extremes, life and death. My brother, father, and I once discovered that someone had broken into our one-room cinder-block ranch house, with a chimney and no indoor plumbing, and pilfered the pantry of our potted meats and canned beans. "We have to call the police," I said, my mind overly influenced by television crime shows. My father responded the way most anyone back then might have. "Mijita," he said, "you can't blame a person for trying to eat."

The South Texas landscape the boy and I now traveled was covered with layers of security: helicopters and planes and surveillance blimps; sheriffs, state police, and federal agents; unmanned aerial vehicles that watched and hunted.

I circled around and pulled over. The boy approached the passenger window. He was no more than sixteen years old. His clothes were in tatters, his thick black hair standing on end, powdered with dirt. "Please take me," he pleaded. "I'm going to Houston and then to New York."

"Where are you from?" I asked. "Guatemala," he replied in the accent of the highland Maya. "How long have you been out here?" The boy explained that he had been traveling with a group when the Border Patrol came around and captured everyone but him. He believed he had wandered through the brush for days.

His distress was so obvious; why did I have to gauge it? I needed to bargain for time. The boy didn't know this, but I had no safe place to take him and helping him was criminal.

"Please just take me with you," he said gently. "Take me to your house." But I didn't have a house. I was borrowing one from my cousin. With the boy inside, it would become a stash house. "Take me to Houston," he pleaded, but I couldn't. I don't know why, but I couldn't. Besides it wouldn't be long before some small-town sheriff's deputy pulled me over. I am often pulled over. Men with badges have told me that a single woman driving an old pickup truck fits the profile of a drug mule.

The boy had a phone number, some family member or a contact in Houston. Could I at least call them? He began to recite the numbers that he had clearly turned over in his mind for thousands of miles, then he stopped. He couldn't remember the middle digits. A look of panic came over him and he began banging his head in the air, as if trying to knock free the missing numbers. The sun had scorched his mind.

The skin on the boy's face had drawn taut, giving him a look of surprise. He was charred, burnt. He looked like a cartoon character after a bomb blew up in his face. Such a silly shameful thought, but it was meant to deflect the indisputable truth that he had the look of someone who would soon be found on a ranch, lifeless under a mesquite tree. The boy finally pieced together a string of digits that amounted to a non-working number.

"Súbete," I told him, "get in." He jumped into the bed of the truck and laid flat and stiff, closing his eyes to shut out the sun overhead. If a trucker were to pass by and see the boy, we were busted. If I got pulled over, we were busted.

The sound of the engine and wind slamming against the open window filled the truck cab, creating the sensation of traveling through a tunnel. I dialed the number of a civil rights attorney, which a friend had given me while I had been watching the boy. No one answered. I called the friend, an activist, and told him I had the boy. After he told me I did the right thing by getting the boy off the road, he wished me well, which was the most he could offer. Later, when the boy was gone, another friend mentioned a nearby restaurant where the owner doesn't ask questions. Only then did I find a local priest who allows migrants to call their families from his telephone and



"Falling," by Josh Verduzco

then wait in the courtyard. He stopped inviting the migrants indoors, after a parishioner threw a fuss.

At the first street in town, a town named Riviera that everyone pronounces Rivera, I turned right and headed south. The paved road led to a caliche path that turned to dirt and I pulled over near a small water plant, barely out of eyeshot of the nearby houses.

I turned off the engine and instantly noticed the peace. Doves cried in the distance. The grasses rustled, the mesquite and huisache trees rustled in the breeze coming off the bay miles to the east. The boy sat up in the truck bed and we listened in silence before I explained that he was far from Houston, far from New York, and he had to stop walking. "You will die," I told him. He knew the words to be true.

I offered to take him to the northbound highway. If you're lucky maybe a truck driver will take you to Houston, I told him, but if you hang around the *migra* will find you. I didn't tell him that if he was unlucky someone might pick him up and sell him, force him to work, or that the local cops would grab him. There's money to be made from boys like him. Alive, he became another "alien" apprehension, and a reason to pump money into the local police departments.

He weighed his choices silently. If you can consider that he was only three hundred miles away from the end of a journey that had likely spanned weeks—days gone by eating ramen noodles or nothing at all, crammed into safe houses, preyed upon by criminal gangs that exploited his desperation and weakness, beaten and robbed by corrupt police—then you can understand that risking death was a viable option.

On the borderlands, acts of compassion and humanity are buried by laws created by people in faraway places so as to make the word *them* a cushion against a feeling of utter helplessness. Only when you have offered death to a child can you understand that the laws of the borderlands don't apply anywhere else within our country.

And that's why an apology was attached to his only other option: call the Border Patrol. Whatever you do, I repeated, you can't keep walking. His entire body shuddered, his face crinkled, and his lips curled up to weep—but there were no tears.

"Do you need water?" I asked, leaning on the truck. He showed me his water laying next him on the truck bed. But he was hungry. I offered the half-eaten taquito still in its sack in the truck bed, where I casually threw it the day before. He accepted the bag but waited to eat.

We didn't have much time. Sooner or later someone would see us and call the Border Patrol. I later learned I had unknowingly delivered us to a notorious rendezvous site used by smugglers. The coyote trail was what my cousin called the dirt path that leads from the nearby reservoir back to the road. I called that cousin and asked for the phone number of the local Border Patrol station and then I explained that I had come upon a migrant boy. He was lost and needed help, I told them, while trying to ignore what their "help" would mean. And I would be gone by the time they arrived.

Before I drove off, I told the boy my name and asked for his. He lifted his eyes. This boy, whose body had been smuggled, stashed away, and then roasted alive as he trudged through harsh terrain, who begged for help and was turned away, looked at me and said, "My name is Alex." And then, as if he had made a new friend, he smiled.



Pop artist Andy Warhol, right, snaps a shot of painter Jamie Wyeth during an exhibition at New York's Coe Kerr gallery, Nov. 9, 1977, Associated Press. *Warhol's Nature* was organized by Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR, in collaboration with The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA. *Jamie Wyeth* was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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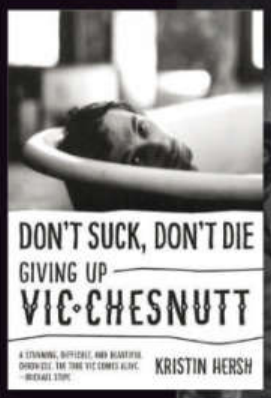
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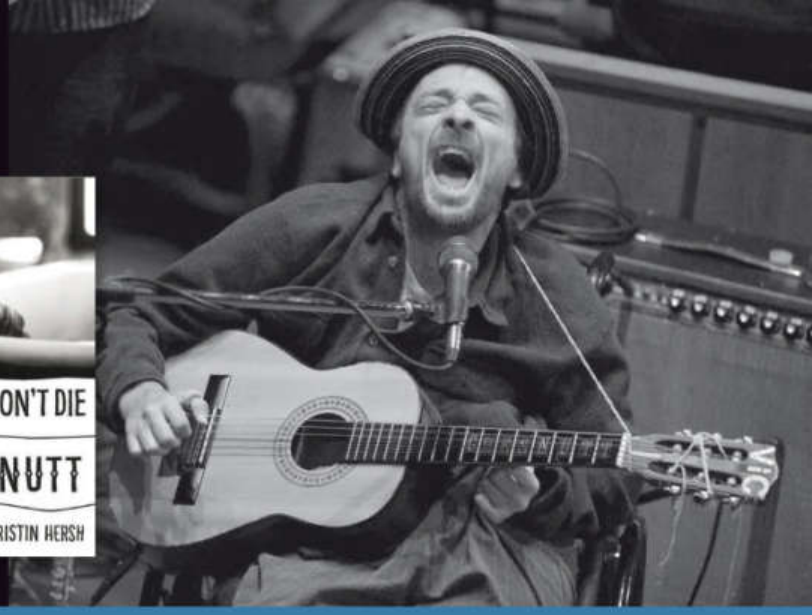
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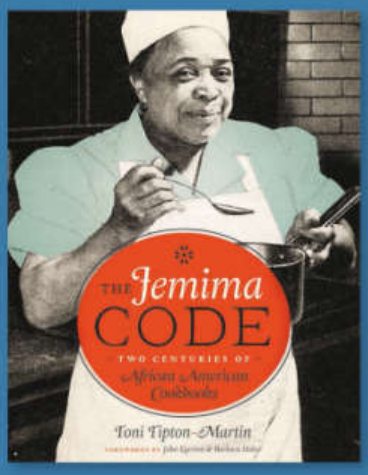
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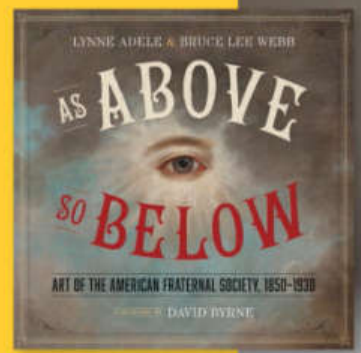
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First, We Were Talking About Skinny Dipping

BY BETH ANN FENNELLY

Then, more broadly, about sin: four women, sharing some laughs. We'd done our fair share of sinning: we were women, like I said, not girls.

The most glamorous one said, "The things I've done that others would call sins"—she didn't enumerate but we could guess—"weren't, really."

We waited.

"Do you want to hear about a sin?"

We nodded.

"Fourth of July, I took my grandkids to the parade."

(We'd forgotten she had grandkids, that's how glamorous she was.)

"I'd gotten there early to stake out a space at the front. I spread my blanket, guarded it because the parade got crowded."

We nodded.

"And right as the parade started, a group of teenage boys swarmed onto the curb. Loud, carousing, spilling their beer. I wasn't having it—*Move aside,* I told them, *my grandkids can't see.*" She looked off, hearing the high school tuba, the clicking playing cards woven into the spokes of kids' bicycles. "There was a girl with them, maybe two or three years younger. In white capris." She looked at us again. "The parade was long, and when she got tired, she sat on the corner of my blanket."

"And?"

"And I told her to get off."

We nodded, grievously, we who'd been girls in white capris on the edge of something, scooting off the blanket onto the wet grass.

"Catalyzing Openness," by Neil Craver

Morning Waves

BY DREW BRATCHER

On a sunless morning in early September, twenty-some miles north of Charleston proper, I left my wife in bed, dressed my son in swimming trunks, and walked out the back of a rented condo for the Atlantic shore. Beckett had recently begun speaking in discernible English. At the sight of the seascape, he jolted up straight in his perch atop my shoulders and, in a fit of recognition, drummed his bare feet against my bare chest. Boat, he said. He leveled his left middle finger at a trawler on the horizon. Beach, he said, a little quieter. Sand.

I paused at the end of the boardwalk. A pair of terns down-drifted like kites in the breeze. The rap of Beckett's legs had slowed to a tapping. And what else, I asked, brushing at his toes. What else do you see? Ocean, he said, trailing off, as if he had found the word (no doubt learned from picture books in our D.C. apartment) an insufficient measure of the real thing. Or perhaps he was bored. Or going in his diaper. The boy's reticence could make for a difficult read.

Once I hauled him to a Joan Miró exhibition in the National Gallery. I thought he might get a rise out of Miró's paintings of Catalan farmers. One of Beckett's first words, after all, had been tractor. His favorite toy was a plastic barn. At the museum, I sidled up close to a canvas called *The Farm,* turning sideways so as to give Beckett a clear view of the lizards between the bean hills. He was statue-still. He took it all in with intense regard. Or so I thought. His weight shifted, a slumping there at the center, and when I glanced down at him in the carrier, the drool was already pooling in the tucks of his neck.

Unlike the Miró, the beach roused him. He heeled at my chest and pitched face-forward. I no sooner flipped him from my back and stood him in the sand than he ducked my handhold and took off. Beckett had started walking around the time he started talking. He still staggered, still fell, still gave hell to his palms and knees, but a little less so every day and every day with quicker rebound.

He was nearly to the water before I caught him. When I offered my hand this time, he took it. I shot a look over my shoulder at the hotel balconies. For a moment, the thought of someone spotting us flooded me with anxiety. The clasp was one of those moves that outed me as a father, a title I still felt unfit to claim. Father was what my father was, what my grandfather was. Most days I felt like a middle-schooler headed to a dance in an old blazer, strutting but failing to look the part.

Daddy, Beckett said. He yanked at my arm and, when he had my attention, cocked his free middle finger at the fishing boat from before. (Where did he pick up this gesture?) It was in motion now, headed south toward Charleston, nicking a white ramifying gash in the outer blue. The beach was empty. A quarter of seven and not another shadow on that stretch of ash-gray sand. I wondered if Beckett would go any farther. His introduction to the sea—six, maybe seven, months earlier—had ended in a mouthful of seaweed and a fit for the ages. My wife, half-joking, half-serious, worried that the incident had scarred him forever. He would never be able to fish or swim or make transatlantic flights. He would never be able to stomach *Treasure Island* or *Moby-Dick.*

But if Beckett had put to memory the earlier fiasco, he gave few signs. He flashed a sideways grin and marched with me into the shallows, dropped my hand and went splashing into the ripples and foam. He was still moving, yipping and kicking up spray, when a low, late-breaking whitecap sat him in the water. Before the next wave could crash, I scooped him into my arms. He was breathless, tense. I had a mind to call it a morning, but when I asked him if he wanted to keep going, he nodded his head yes.

We waded into waist-high water. Beckett took hold of my neck. I bent my knees and dipped until our upper bodies were enveloped. It had been several minutes since I had faced the shore. I was under the illusion that we had been moving in more or less a straight line, but we had drifted a good ways from the boardwalk, rerouted, almost imperceptibly, by the tide. I pointed out the condo, the car, the pool, over which a crescent moon and palmetto tree slunk and whipped against a tall metal pole.

Just then I noticed two women walking on the beach. They were lugging buckets, the shell-collecting kind, but they had ceased their foraging and were waving in our direction. I had never seen them before. Perhaps, I thought, they were simply being convivial, responding in kind to the sight of a father playing with his son. In their presence, my insecurity shape-shifted into something like pride. I gave a harried wave then spun around and lunged several long steps forward. The slime gave beneath my toes and I felt a cold undercurrent on my calves.

Still, Beckett held on, even while the water lapped at our armpits. He was relying on me utterly. He had surrendered something of himself out there where his feet no longer touched bottom. Overcome by the trust in his hold, I dropped my hands to his middle and tossed him into the air. He shot from the water with splashes and gulps. At the top, a fraught look, the likes of which I had seen when he encountered big dogs, swelled in his eyes. But when I caught him and the spray cleared, he slapped at the water and shouted. *Again.*

Again, I had learned, was Beckett-speak for bliss. Again was hard to inspire but easy enough to answer. In quick succession, I threw him into the sky one time after another, catching him at the waist just as his feet creased the water, sinking him chin deep before launching him yet again.

The water rained around us, sloshing and jetting, while the wind blinded and deafened me to our surroundings such that the cool wet ruckus, when it finally waned, was a kind of coming to, a returning to the senses, but not to stillness and not to quiet, for there were howls coming from the beach.

The pair from before was standing directly in front of us. They had dropped their buckets and taken to waving their hands in big wide circles. I glanced over my shoulder to see if I had missed something, to see if they were flagging down a jet ski or a snorkeler out beyond us. By the time I glanced back, they were jumping up and down. Hands cupped around her mouth, one of the women shouted urgent words I could not quite catch for Beckett's ardent cries of again, again.

I peered to my left and right but did not notice anything out of the ordinary, only waves under clouds and a kite-tail of gulls drifting between. The fishing boat was but a glint now in the southern distance. Confounded and increasingly paranoid, I lifted Beckett to my shoulders and high-stepped through the waves and breakers, shifting the boy to my hip once I hit the swash.

The strangers ushered us onto the shore as if we had survived a shipwreck. One produced a towel and draped it around Beckett's shoulders. The other rubbed our backs and shook her head, asking if we were all right, repeating Oh God, Oh thank God.

The sprint to shore had sucked the breath



out of me. What was it? I asked through gasps. What was it in the water? A fin, they said. They had seen a fin where we had been wading. Beckett slumped on my hip, dangling his arm like he wanted down. We thought we'd never get your attention, the women continued. We thought we were going to have to come in after you. The frightening word remained unsaid: shark.

I stood Beckett in the sand beside me. I looked again but still saw nothing but sea. Was it out there? And if so, had we been in danger? The fin might very well have belonged to a dolphin. Even so, I couldn't shake the notion that I'd offended a tacit code of fatherhood. The first rule, the only rule: never put your child in harm's way.

But when I bent down to check on Beckett and attempt to express my remorse, he was oblivious. He held up a frittered piece of driftwood. Stick, he said, and lifted it over his head like a torch. And for a flash that still flickers it seemed that for all my failures, real or imagined, I had managed to shield him from something big while we were roughhousing in the water—from jaws perhaps, but also from my doubts, fears. What could come between us now? We had survived the morning waves.

"Plovers," Malibu, California (2003), by John Huggins



From the series *Skeletons in the Closet* by Klaus Pichler. Courtesy of the Anzenberger Agency: anzenbergergallery.com

Clidastes in Limbo

BY ASHER ELBEIN

On dry days, when the floodgates lock and the sun shimmers on the waters, a broad shelf of slick white chalk appears along the banks of the Tombigbee River. It glistens beneath the Heflin Dam, a checkerboard of slabs baked from the sea-dust of Cretaceous oceans. It's a good fishing spot. A steady stream of locals from Greene County, Alabama, pick their way down the rocky embankments and along the chalk, rods clattering, stepping carefully over coiled ammonite fossils and bits of driftwood. You can't trust the shelf. Its face changes with every storm, torn up by the roiling water that rushes and gnaws at the slabs of flaking stone. When the waters come down, there's no telling what you'll find.

One hot day in June 2002, a young man named Chris Gladden walked out onto the chalk with his father, two fishing rods, and a bucket. They were wandering the bank when Gladden paused and looked down. Something odd had caught his eye: five quarter-inch bumps of gray stone poking out of the chalk, arranged in a curving line. It didn't look like much, but Gladden—then in his twenties—had spent years involved in the family deer processing business, converting carcasses into piles of venison. More importantly, he'd spent a lot of time collecting fossils as a child. Something about the sight tickled his memory.

"That look like a backbone to you?" Gladden asked his father. His father allowed that it did, and the two men took out their penknives and began scratching at the chalk, fishing trip forgotten. Scraping away white flakes, they worked upward, uncovering the back portion of a slender skull. They stopped when they reached the eye sockets. It was no jumble of eroding bones—this was something good. Worried that others might come along and poach their find, Gladden covered the site with debris from along the riverbank. Then he called the Alabama Museum of Natural History in Tuscaloosa to see if they'd be interested in taking a look.

Gladden was hoping to reach Ed Hooks, the curator of paleontology at the museum. But Hooks and his crew of volunteers were out on a summer field expedition in Dallas County and missed Gladden's call. Instead, the news reached Bing Bluett, a retired professor and amateur paleontologist who often volunteered in the fossil lab. With a university geologist in tow, Bluett drove down to Greene County to meet with Gladden, who took them down the bank, past the boulders, and out onto the expanse of chalk where the remains were hidden. One look was enough. Bluett went back and called Hooks. "Drop everything and get out here," he said. "Whatever you're doing, it's not as important as this."

The bones, they discovered, belonged to an ancient marine reptile called *Clidastes,* a swift and serpentine predator. But the identity of the bones wasn't what excited Bluett. Most fossils are scraps, distorted by the weight of time and rock. Skeletons shown in museums are plastic copies of real fossil material, the gaps filled in through educated guesswork. Finding a complete, articulated skeleton is rare beyond imagining—the equivalent of searching for pottery shards and uncovering a working Mesopotamian brewery. Visually spectacular and scientifically invaluable, such a find can unlock the secrets of an extinct animal and raise a museum to fame. Gladden had stumbled on one through sheer luck.

Gladden named the animal Artemis, after the Greek goddess of the hunt. She has the potential to be the most important *Clidastes* known to science. More than a decade later, hardly anyone outside the museum knows that she exists.

Seen from above, the Alabama of 80 million years ago would be barely recognizable to modern eyes. A massive bay covered most of the state, the southernmost offshoot of an inland sea that once stretched from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The bay featured a unique mixture of sunlight, shallow waters, and upwelling nutrients, creating the perfect conditions for a vibrant marine ecosystem.

Much of it sported fangs. Listing the prehistoric inhabitants of Alabama's oceans is like reading a roll call of Hell's aquarium: goblin sharks, bulldog fish, swordfish with jutting tusks. Marine reptiles shot through the green waters on long flippers, serpentine necks snatching at prey. Most formidable of these predators were Artemis's kin, the mosasaurs, massive cousins of today's monitor lizards, armed with powerful finned tails and immense jaws. Several mosasaur species patrolled the warm waters, most of them thirty feet long and ravenous, able to snap up anything—shark, squid, smaller mosasaur—that crossed their path. The largest, *Mosasaurus maximus,* could grow as large as a humpback whale. At fifteen feet, *Clidastes* were the smallest species.

According to Dana Ehret, the museum's current paleontology curator, Artemis herself measured only ten feet when she died. That would have put her squarely on the menu for larger predators. But there were no signs of struggle or scavenging on the skeleton Gladden had found. So what killed Artemis? How did she come to rest, locked in white chalk, every bone unscathed?

It took two days to pull Artemis out of the rock. After Bluett's call, Hooks drove back from Dallas County, his volunteers in tow. The team built a tarpaulin cover over the skeleton to ward off the boiling June sun. Then they began to dig, racing the weather—if the Tombigbee rose, the skeleton would be lost.

Since Gladden had discovered the fossil, Hooks invited him to stay and help pull it from the chalk. Excited by the chance to participate in a real fossil dig, Gladden pitched in where he could, dusting, scraping, moving rock. They worked fourteen-hour days, in the heat, under the idle gaze of local fishermen. Carefully, they uncovered the top of the skeleton, confirming her completeness. Then, working faster, they carved out a trench ten feet long and eighteen inches deep around the bones, crowbars chipping away at the base of the fossil slab. But when they went to flip it over, the stone fractured under its own weight, splitting into three pieces. After checking to make sure the fossils in each portion were unscathed, Gladden and the other volunteers covered each slab with thick jackets of plaster and carried them, one by one, up the rocky bank to the cars. Soon the fossils arrived at the museum's fossil lab in Tuscaloosa, one hundred and thirty miles west of Heflin Dam. And for a time, there they sat.

Fossils don't pop out of the ground like buried bones. They are themselves composed of fragile rock, and must be meticulously prepared before they are removed from their surrounding matrix of stone. That kind of work should be done by a professional preparator, someone with steady hands and infinite patience. The museum has no such person on staff, and relies mostly on volunteers to clean material. The arrangement works well for scrappy fossils, but



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Artemis was delicate, and Hooks decided to leave her in her jackets until the museum found someone properly qualified to uncover her.

Bluett, who hadn't participated in the excavation, had other ideas. For months, he and a fellow volunteer, David Lueth, begged Hooks to let them work on the fossil. Hooks held them off, but he was in the process of looking for a better-paying position, and Bluett was willing to bide his time. He got his chance in the late spring of 2003, when Hooks accepted a job outside Alabama. The slow pace of museum bureaucracy promised that the curatorship would be vacant for months, if not longer, leaving nobody to supervise Bluett. As soon as he got the news, Bluett marched into Hooks's office. "Guess what?" he said. "The day you get in your car and leave town, David and I are opening that jacket." Faced with the inevitable, Hooks told him to go ahead.

Bluett and Lueth were longtime volunteers of the museum, and both had experience cleaning small fossils. They took their time, working methodically over the slab. Bluett spent more than two hundred hours on the preparation, and Lueth spent hundreds more. But they still made mistakes. Tiny flipper bones were nearly lost one day, when Bluett blew away dust from the rock; he had to spend an hour on hands and knees before he found them on the ground. Once the moisture sustaining plaster that had kept Artemis from breaking apart was removed, the fossilized bone dried faster than the surrounding chalk. As the two men worked on the fossil—chipping at the rock—a shift in moisture levels caused several of the delicate vertebral arches to shatter. They had to be glued back together.

Still, the more of Artemis they uncovered, the more remarkable she seemed. Unlike the incomplete remains of most Alabama mosasaurs, Artemis was found completely intact, preserved in three dimensions. Her long, slender body lay pressed against the rock, the ribs still half-buried, the graceful lines of her skull unbroken. The degree of preservation was incredible; the vertebrae were still porous, their bumps and ridges unsmoothed by time or tide. For an idea of how unlikely this is, Bluett said, imagine tossing a dog into a shark-infested pond. The chances of finding a pristine, articulated skeleton at the bottom are "pretty close to zero."

One possible explanation is offered by Randy McCready, who until recently served as the museum's director. He suspects that Artemis was killed in an underwater landslide, a disaster that swept her over, pinned her, and smothered her beneath the silt. Mosasaurs, he said, probably rested occasionally at the bottom, waiting for unsuspecting prey. If Artemis were lurking on an underwater slope, then she could have been overwhelmed before she had a chance to escape. Trapped beneath the silt, her body would have begun the long process of fossilization, protected from scavengers and the elements.

Dana Ehret and Bluett both agree that this is the most likely scenario. You simply don't get fossils this good, Ehret said, if they lie exposed on the bottom for any length of time. Artemis's bones are unmarred by worm trails, oysters, or sharks' teeth. Her body must have vanished with incredible speed, swallowed up by the seabed in the blink of an eye.

This raised an intriguing possibility. The rapid preservation of Artemis might have allowed more than just her bones to be preserved—perhaps other, rarer traces remained as well. If so, Bluett and McCready believed, Artemis could really be something world class.

Alabama has produced its share of spectacular fossils. From the Carboniferous coal veins of the Appalachian foothills to the crumbling Cenozoic clay near the gulf, strata from multiple epochs lie across the state. In the southernmost fields of Clarke County, nineteenth-century farmers occasionally plowed up great vertebrae from the loam, vertebrae large enough to serve as furniture. In 1835, such bones were officially described by naturalist and physician Richard Harlan as parts of a primitive whale, *Basilosaurus,* a discovery that set off a frenzy among fossil prospectors all over America and Europe. They flocked to Alabama, eager to unearth or purchase more specimens of the strange serpent-whale.

The oddest of these prospectors was Albert Koch, a bombastic German entrepreneur, scientist, and con man. Koch picked his way across southern Alabama in 1845, looking for an artifact spectacular enough to draw a paying public. Later that year, he unveiled a fossil wonder of his own in New York City: the complete remains of a massive sea serpent. Koch dubbed his beast *Hydrargos,* "master of the seas," and claimed before packed crowds all over America that the animal stretched 140 feet long.

Hydrargos seemed too good to be true, and it was. Koch had constructed it from the scavenged parts of ammonite shells and at least six different fossil whales, each collected from a different site in Alabama. He also lied about its size; his 140-foot monstrosity was only 114 feet. Still, Koch successfully sold his creation to the Prussian king, who had it displayed in Berlin's Anatomical Museum over the strenuous objections of its scientists. A few years later, Koch did it again, unloading a second *Hydrargos* for a tidy profit on a credulous museum owner in Chicago.

For all its duplicity, Koch's hoax offered a dream that contemporary paleontologists couldn't quite match. The discipline was a young one, and its proponents were still struggling to make sense of the fragmentary remains they were uncovering. Reconstructions of extinct animals shifted wildly with every publication, each form more unlikely and speculative than the last. In such an anarchic environment, Koch offered the seductive promise of a perfect skeleton: a set of remains so spectacular, so flawless, that they could answer any question about their long-dead owner. Moreover, Koch proved that possessing such skeletons all but guaranteed the attention of an enthusiastic public.

Paleontologists spent the next 100 years chasing that dream. Most went west, lured by the massive dinosaur fossils emerging from the badland bluffs. But in 1945, a staff member from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago happened to swing east after a collection trip in Arkansas. He spent a few days scavenging in the chalk gullies of the Alabama Black Belt and was impressed enough by what he found to suggest a full expedition. The following year the Field Museum came down in force, on a months-long excursion led by Rainer Zangerl, the curator of fossil reptiles. Everything they found was shipped north, to either the Field Museum or the Smithsonian. Almost none of it, Ehret says, was ever returned to Alabama.

That story was repeated endlessly across the state, with basilosaurs, with delicate amphibian footprints, with the whole prehistoric ocean life of the Black Belt. Collectors arrived from outside and left with spectacular fossils. Alabama, with little in the way of a professional paleontological presence, had to watch as its wonders were shipped away. Homegrown collectors consisted of amateurs like Gladden, who mostly found scraps. Even now that the Alabama Museum has taken over the bulk of the state's fieldwork, most of the really spectacular remains are gone. "Chicago got the good stuff," Ehret says. "We're stuck waiting however many hundred years it'll take for the



rock to erode away and reveal new material."

Now, the museum's collection is filled with isolated pieces: jaws, shells, vertebrae by the hundreds. But while these fossils are important, very few of them are on display in the exhibit hall; it's hard to get people excited about bits of bone. Even so, there's something exciting about Artemis. She shares that much with Koch's *Hydrargos*—both embody the idea of spectacular completeness, the tantalizing thought that by looking at petrified bones, one can glimpse a vanished life.

And yet the mosasaur's sinuous body still lies half-sunken in the shale, like a carcass in the shallows of a frozen ocean. She has never been fully excavated: after the troubles Bluett and Lueth had preparing Artemis's top half, nobody since has been willing to go in blind and risk damaging whatever secrets might still be buried in the rock. The museum put Artemis on exhibit in 2002, in a case a foot smaller than her complete body—there was no money for a larger case—so the skeleton's middle chunk is in storage. At the moment, the museum's complete *Clidastes* is presented incompletely.

The question the curators face now is what to do with her. According to Ehret, Artemis, if studied properly, could reveal a wealth of information. An analysis of rare-earth elements in her bones could reveal her metabolism. Studying samples from vertebrae might show how old she was when she died, and yield valuable data about growth rates in mosasaurs. The remains of her last meal might linger in her ribs. Before those possibilities can be explored, however, Artemis needs to be both fully prepped and formally described in a scientific journal. The prep work alone would take years, Ehret says, and much of it would have to be done on a microscopic level, on the off chance that skin impressions had been preserved. And without a formal scientific description, Artemis cannot be cited in other studies. She can only be mentioned in passing, as an undescribed specimen, which is the scientific equivalent of not existing at all.

Several things stand in the way of decoding Artemis. The first is a simple lack of finances: in order to move forward, Artemis needs a CT scan to check for delicate features hidden in the rock. Such procedures aren't cheap, and Artemis won't be touched again until she gets one. Commercial organizations like Colorado's Triebold Paleontology have approached the museum about preparing Artemis, a task they would perform in exchange for the right to produce and sell replicas of her skeleton to other institutions. Under a deal like that, the museum would receive a five percent cut for each replica sold. But by keeping the preparation of Artemis in-house, the museum hopes to recoup the costs of the CT scan through selling replicas themselves. Besides, McCready says, if Artemis is to be prepared at all, she should be prepared in the museum. Too many of Alabama's fossils have left the state. Now that they have something spectacular, they intend to hold on to her.

A larger issue is scheduling. Since 2002 the museum has gone through several curators, all of whom have had their hands full with other projects. None of the museum's resident paleontologists specializes in mosasaurs, and none of the visiting ones have stayed long enough to work on her. McCready himself left last September, and there's no guarantee his successor will have the time or interest to navigate the financial obstacles that would be involved in freeing Artemis from her tomb.

The Alabama Museum of Natural History is tucked away in Smith Hall, in a nondescript corner of the University of Alabama. Chris Gladden and I met there to pay our respects to the beast herself. We entered through the glass doors and walked up a marble staircase, into a wide gallery filled with wooden cases and hardwood floors. The skeleton of a *Basilosaurus* hung overhead, the bones of its flippers curled like grasping hands. The hall was empty of all but the occasional student hurrying to geology class elsewhere in the building. Our footsteps echoed in the space.

To the right stood Artemis's display case, the light from a nearby window playing over the intricate lines of her bones and pooling in the empty sockets of her eyes. Since the sediment of the inland sea compacted her to stone 80 million years ago, continents have moved and oceans have retreated, the rock above her eroding away by inches, until the day the waters of the Tombigbee fell and a fisherman stepped over her bones. Gladden looked down at a placard on the case that proclaimed, in tiny typed letters, that Artemis is the most complete mosasaur in the world. He examined her teeth: the teeth of a swift, powerful hunter. For a moment, he said, he can see her as she was, in a time when the world was younger, richer, and crueler. Sometimes that's enough.



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Pilgrims of the Lost Cemeteries

BY CHRISTINA COOKE

The closest the Cable sisters can get to home these days is by floating above it in a boat. This is how they spent the third Sunday in May, reminiscing about what lay beneath Fontana Lake back when this North Carolina land was a spring-fed family farm ringed by mountains. "Our house sat right out here and under the water about forty or fifty feet deep," said Helen Cable Vance, pointing over the edge of a twenty-four-passenger pontoon boat to the rippled water's surface, where a brown log house with a red-shingled roof once stood. It was a drizzly morning, and the shore, one hundred yards away, was deep green, punctuated by the round white poof balls of the mountain laurels in bloom. "In my mind's eye, I can see the potato field right behind the house," Helen said. "I can see the apple trees, and I can see the barn and the cattle and the crib."

Helen and her siblings, now in their eighties, grew up in this cove in the 1920s and '30s, though they called it a holler then, before the Tennessee Valley Authority dammed the Little Tennessee River to produce hydroelectric power for the war effort and for customers throughout the Southeast. When water began backing up into the valley in 1944, a number of family farms, settlements, and towns were submerged. Property above the high-water mark on the north shore—including twenty-eight cemeteries and more than one thousand graves—was absorbed into Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Despite a contentious, decades-long fight, the major road through the area, NC 288, was never rebuilt, making the land inaccessible by motor vehicle.

I first learned about the flooded towns when I was fourteen, on a summer vacation in the Smokies. As my family and I were hiking along a trail through the hardwoods along the north shore of Fontana Lake, we stumbled upon the rusted skeleton of what was likely a Model B Ford from the early 1930s. Though the windshield, windows, and wheels were absent and the doors were detached and lying in the leaves, the cab and hood remained mostly intact. This vehicle had likely broken down, my father explained. Because gas and tires were difficult to come by during wartime, the owner had probably not been able to return for the car before access was cut off for good. The out-of-place vehicle—and the stories its presence suggested—held my fascination for years.

Now it's difficult to piece together information about the people who once occupied these mountain forests. In pursuit of a wild, natural state for the new section of national park, the government was thorough in its removal of physical remains. Residents were asked to pry apart buildings and carry the lumber away, and the structures that remained were burned to the ground. "They wanted wilderness and to get rid of everything they could," Helen said. "But they can't do away with everything as long as we're living. We've still got it in our minds. *We* know where we lived."

Bright and full of energy, Helen and her sisters, Mildred and Darleene, described to me their front porch swing, the washbasin under the oak tree, the potato patch, and their thirty-nine stands of bees. They recounted the tree with the crooked trunk that marked the way to the family cemetery and the Indian trade beads Aunt Prudie used to find on the property. They remembered the times, after the property was flooded, when the TVA would draw down the lake to inspect and maintain the dam—they would boat partway, then walk across the exposed lakebed to their old home place, where they would find artifacts from childhood in the lake-bottom sediment: glass marbles, the leg of a porcelain doll, the wheels of a tricycle, the smooth white stones that had lined their mother's flowerbed. Their voices carrying across the surface of the water, the sisters recounted details and told stories, breathing life and nuance into a land whose variations have been filled in and covered for more than seventy years.

The Cable sisters' great-great-grandparents Samuel and Elizabeth migrated from Cades Cove, an isolated valley in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, into the wilderness of Swain County, North Carolina, in the mid-1830s. They arrived soon after the federal government forced the Cherokee, the area's original occupants, to territory west of the Mississippi River along the Trail of Tears. They were the second family to settle the Hazel Creek basin. The Proctors came first.

Like many families in the area, the Cables survived as subsistence farmers. The sisters' father, Jake, a natural-born storyteller, ran the farm and worked as a planer for the W. M. Ritter Lumber company. Their mother, Sarah, taught school until she married. On the farm, they grew peas, carrots, onions, corn, and sweet potatoes in large gardens, picked berries from the wild, and canned everything they could. They kept cattle, hogs, and chickens, and their grandfather was known for his success as a bear hunter, killing more than one hundred in his time. In a blacksmith shop on their property, the men hammered their own tools and plow points, and when the children's shoes wore out, their father would resole them. "In the Thirties, you had to do your own thing," Helen said. "There wasn't much buying in those days."

When the sisters and their older brothers, Clyde and Guy, were young, their lives centered on school, church, and farm chores. They walked three miles to and from the one-room Fairview schoolhouse for elementary school. Later, they walked to Proctor, population 1,000, for high school.

For fun, the children played hide-and-seek, traversed the forest through high tree branches, played games with balls they fashioned by wrapping pieces of rubber in twine, and crafted toy geese, foxes, horses, and hogs out of corn stalks. The family would sometimes visit an uncle in Cades Cove, leaving home at six in the morning, walking twenty-five miles over Native American footpaths, and arriving in time for a late dinner.

Helen was a particularly good shot and by age fifteen or sixteen, she was capable of shooting clothespins off a clothesline from a respectable distance, said her daughter Leeunah Woods. "She was a lady, but she was a little bit tomboyish too. She's outgoing, but she's cautious. And if she believes in something and knows she's right, she'll fight for it until the day she dies."

When World War II began, Clyde and Guy left to serve in the Navy, and Jake took a job building the Fontana Dam four miles downstream from the family homestead. Initiated in January 1942—three weeks after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor—the dam was intended to supply hydroelectric power to the Alcoa aluminum plant in Tennessee, which churned out metal for military aircraft. Locals learned after the war that the dam also supplied power to the top-secret Manhattan Project production site in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which developed the atomic bomb.

By 1943, the dam-building project was employing 5,000 men, seven days a week, in around-the-clock shifts. Jake started out as a jackhammer operator and later helped mix and pour the three million cubic yards of concrete that went into the project. The 480-foot-tall



Art by Anni Leppälä. Courtesy of the artist and Purdy Hicks Gallery, London

structure—the tallest concrete dam east of the Rocky Mountains—was complete in November 1944. Once kicked into operation, it would flood 10,230 acres of land to an average depth of 130 feet, creating Fontana Lake, which is about thirty miles long. It would also displace 1,311 families from the land they had occupied for generations.

The Cable family was saddened at the prospect of leaving the farm—not least because they were paid only $8,000 for their sixty acres of property, a sum Jake and his seven siblings split among themselves. Though Jake helped build the dam, he was especially upset about the uprooting, Helen said, because he, his father, and his grandfather had lived on that property their entire lives. "It was sad for us kids too, because we were going to lose our classmates and cousins, and we didn't know if we'd ever see them again," she said. "But children adjust better to things."

Despite their sorrow, the family prepared to leave without protest. Helen helped her father disassemble the family house, nail by nail, board by board, and pack the lumber into a truck they borrowed from a friend. Then she gathered two keepsakes—a small plastic lamb she got for Christmas one year and a five-sided medicine bottle her grandfather gave her—and moved with her family to a four-bedroom house on an acre of land in Sylva. By late March 1944, the Cables had left Hazel Creek and the family farm forever.

In addition to holding the resting place of their ancestors, the Cable family's land bore years of fond recollections—playing marbles in the yard, tending vegetables in the garden, taking long rambles through the woods. After they left the farm, the family occasionally borrowed boats to visit the north shore of the lake, but true access always seemed just out of reach. "We'd look across the lake and get so homesick," Helen said.

At a family reunion in a campground near the lake in 1976, the Cables decided to take action—to organize the first Decoration Day in thirty years. According to Alan Jabbour, former director of the American Folklife Center and author of the book *Decoration Day in the Mountains,* Decoration Day has been practiced in the rural Southern Appalachians since before the Civil War. It is the basis for Memorial Day, though the national holiday is slightly different in that it focuses on those who died during military service and has less of a religious association. On a community's annual Decoration Day, which usually occurs in the late spring or early summer, people visit family and community cemeteries to clean, maintain, and decorate the graves as well as hold small religious services, sing gospel songs, and partake in a meal called a "dinner on the ground." A Decoration Day celebration is about piety, Jabbour says, about taking the time to demonstrate respect and "maintaining a close sense of connection with your community, and not just the living but also the dead." In some parts of the South, graves may be festooned with blankets of flowers.

Growing up in the Twenties and Thirties, the Cable sisters came to Cable Cemetery the fourth Sunday every May for Decoration Day. Months in advance, their mother, Sarah, would sew a new dress for each of the girls, creating her own patterns based on the styles she found in the Sears Roebuck catalog. The children would fashion crepe-paper flowers with wire stems—roses, peonies, gladiolas, dahlias, and sweet peas—to lay on the graves, dipping the finished products in wax to protect them from the rain. Sometimes they made flower-covered wreaths, as well.

In April 1978, Helen, Mildred, and a few others piloted a boat to return to the cemetery and check on its condition. When they reached the ridge-top burial ground, they were horrified. "It would break your heart," Helen said. "A third of the monuments were half-turned or turned over. It was in bad disarray. And little shrub pine sprouts were growing all over it."

For help, the sisters called the National Park Service. At the time, the NPS refused to transport former residents across the lake, but they did agree to clean up the cemetery. ("It was clean as a pin!" Mildred said.) Helen and Mildred arranged their own transport, set a date for the decoration, phoned relatives to let them know about it, and placed newspaper, radio, and TV ads to get the word out. On the fourth Sunday in May 1978, more than one hundred family members showed up, and several people with personal fishing boats shuttled everyone back and forth across the lake. "Everybody was so thrilled to get to go back," Helen said. "I took my daddy's younger sister, and she was just like a little kid going through there."

Spurred by the success of the venture, the sisters organized another decoration at the nearby Proctor Cemetery. The following year, they arranged a few more, and the year after that, they held decorations at all twenty-eight cemeteries, all of which are on the north shore, transporting motorcycles and wagons across the lake to carry elderly pilgrims unable to walk the long distances between drop points and gravesites. A year or two later, Helen and Mildred founded the North Shore Cemetery Association, made up of former north shore residents and their descendants, and together the group petitioned the Park Service for better access to their ancestral land. While they were never able to secure a road, they did reach a compromise that grants them limited access to the territory: since 1980, Park employees have kept the cemeteries clear of leaves, weeds, and fallen limbs throughout the year. They provide boat and ATV transport from April until mid-October. "They've been real good to work with," Helen said, "but we had to push them for everything we've got."

When I went to the Fontana Basin on the third Sunday in May, I woke up early and drove deep into the mountains from my sister's house in Asheville. Eventually, the roads narrowed and the trees thickened, and I turned right onto gravel.

I found the extended Cable family mingling on a boat ramp along the south shore of Fontana Lake. A light rain was falling. I approached Helen, who was juggling an umbrella, a folding stool, a walking stick, and a canvas tote bag of artificial flowers. She welcomed me and gave me the lay of the land: she pointed out her sisters Mildred, Darleene, and Eleanor, and her cousin Joretta, who grew up in another abandoned north shore town. "We've got some cousins from Tennessee here also," she said, excitedly.

A pontoon boat named *Miss Hazel* carried us across the lake and dropped us off at a narrow opening in the trees along the north shore. Lugging bags, coolers, and chairs, we ascended the half-mile trail through the woods on foot. The ground was covered in a soft bed of pine needles, and the green leaves glistened from the rain. Partway up, Helen, Mildred, and Eleanor zoomed by us on ATVs driven by uniformed Park Service employees. The sisters appeared to enjoy the ride immensely.

Cable Cemetery sat in a clearing at the crest of a hill. The sloped ground was mostly bare, save patches of light-green moss creeping in at the edges. "There's five generations buried here in this cemetery," said Helen, carrying her large bag of flowers onto the bare red soil. Of the nearly 156 graves scattered throughout the burial ground, all but about twenty-five are relatives of Helen and her sisters.

"That's my great-great-grandfather and -grandmother," she said, pointing out the already decorated tombstones of Elizabeth and Samuel Cable, who died in 1877 and 1887, respectively. She bent down and pressed the stem of a purple flower into the soft clay ground

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Broadway



JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT
Monday, Sept. 28, 2015 - 7:30 p.m.



THE MIDTOWN MEN
Tuesday Oct. 13, 2015 - 7:30 p.m



MAMMA MIA!
Monday, Feb. 15, 2016 - 7:30 p.m.



SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER
Sunday Feb. 28, 2016 - 5 p.m.

Night Out



THE NATIONAL CIRCUS AND ACROBATS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, DIRECT FROM BEIJING
Thursday, Oct. 8, 2015 - 7:30 p.m.



AN EVENING WITH SINBAD
Friday, Nov. 13, 2015 - 7:30 p.m



AT CHRISTMAS
THE BLIND BOYS OF ALABAMA
Sunday, Dec. 6, 2015 - 3 p.m.



ELVIS LIVES!
Thursday, Jan. 28, 2016 - 7:30 p.m.

Pops



WYNONNA & THE BIG NOISE
Friday, Sept. 18, 2015 - 7:30 p.m.



AN ACOUSTIC NIGHT WITH
RICK SPRINGFIELD
Thursday, Oct. 29, 2015 - 7:30 p.m.

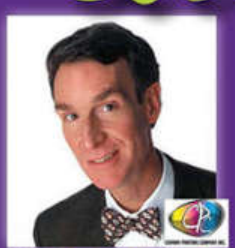


MONTEREY JAZZ FESTIVAL
Friday, Jan. 22, 2016 - 7:30 p.m.

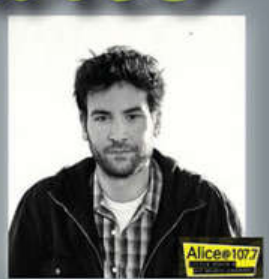


DISNEY IN CONCERT
WITH CONWAY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Saturday, April 16, 2016 - 7:30 p.m.

Lectures



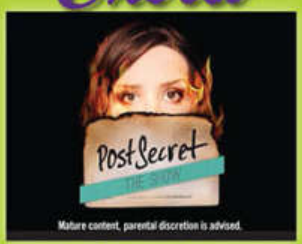
BILL NYE
THE SCIENCE GUY
Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2015 - 7:30 p.m.
UCA Farris Center



JOSH RADNOR
Monday, April 4, 2016 - 7:30 p.m.

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Extra



POSTSECRET: THE SHOW
Friday, March 11, 2016 - 7:30 p.m.
$10 General Public

before a neighboring plot. "I'm gonna put a flower on this one since it doesn't have but one on it."

"Helen," Mildred called from about ten feet away. "We need a marker here, for these unknowns." She pointed to a cluster of unmarked graves around her.

Mildred said she and her family have never questioned the importance of paying tribute to deceased family members. "The Lord's been good to us, watching over us all the time. And those older-generation people blazed the trails for us—it was wilderness in here," she says. "We were taught to honor our dead and care for our history."

In the cemetery, Helen rested her fingertips on the top edge of a gravestone that had a garland of flowers carved across the top. "Right here is my brother's grave," she said. In conversations about the graveyard, the Cable sisters frequently mention their baby brother, who died the day he was born, on February 1, 1924. The gravestone inscription—which reads "Sufford Lee Cable"—is misspelled; his name was Shufford. "It always irks me," Helen said, stooping to push another flower into the ground.

As rain pattered on a large white tarp strung in the trees above the picnic tables outside of Cable Cemetery, Helen offered a formal welcome to more than seventy-five pilgrims, both hands resting on the cork end of her walking stick. Holding tattered hymnals, a small group sang gospel songs including "I'll Fly Away" and "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder I'll Be There." A tall man with a white goatee delivered a message about the Cable family's legacy and the coming of Christ to judge the quick and the dead.

When the service concluded, participants spread colorful cloths across the tables and scooped pulled pork, collard greens, and creamed corn onto sectioned Styrofoam plates. Someone invited the park workers to join. ("We got those park boys spoiled," Leeunah observed as the uniformed men filled their plates.)

While a lot of the sisters' contemporaries participated in the decoration pilgrimages of the early years, many people who were born and raised on the north shore have now died. In recent years, the four Cable sisters have found themselves among the last who know first-hand what life was like there before the flood.

Though their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren attend the decorations, most are not regular about their visits. The sisters realize that young people's lives are busy, but they worry that the next generations won't pick up where they leave off. If Helen could impress upon her descendants a single message regarding the tradition she and her sisters have fought to preserve, it would be this: "Remember our relatives and ancestors, and do things to honor them," she said. "Remember from where you come."

As the visitors finished lunch, they packed their things and headed down the hill to catch the shuttle across the lake. I stayed with the sisters, who lingered at the cemetery, now dotted with vibrant yellows, reds, oranges, pinks, and purples.

After a while, we migrated down the hill and boarded the boat. As we glided across the wide water, the elements that had infused the ceremonies—history, memory, nature, and imagination—began to give way. Yet the strength of the Cables remained. Their story is reinforced by the time they spend reflecting on the people and place that tie them together. On the ground where yesterday holds as much sway as today, they absorb their family history. And they remember who they are.





Stick

BY WILLIAM CAVERLEE

The day Stick arrived in camp, we named him after a piece of dead vegetation while hoping that a more contemptible name would come along—but one never did. Still, we were dumbstruck when he drew from his footlocker an enormous trove of baseball cards, chewing gum, Hershey's bars, comic books, and model airplanes—the Smithsonian of camp provender, news of which raced through all sixteen cabins, from the seven-year-olds to the teens. The resulting camp-wide moans of envy and longing only served to increase the smug satisfaction within our cabin of twelve-year-olds, the Eagles (each cabin was named for a species of wildlife), since Stick and his treasure chest were *ours,* to be protected at all costs from raiders and vandals. And, yes, Stick needed protection, being undersized and timorous, afraid of being hit in baseball, afraid of the soft pitches lobbed to him in practice, afraid of a basketball bounced to him from off court. And thus we constantly watched over him: on his treks to the bathhouse, or during free period when he tried to play Ping-Pong or missed a ball in tennis or dog-paddled in the swimming pool.

We protected him until the day he instituted a rationing system for his stockpile and began keeping records in a spiral notebook of loaned checkerboards, toy cars, and airplanes, capping our limit at five, instituting his new regime among his own cabin-mates, even hinting that he might require cash payment for food items, replenished weekly by packages from home. *O Stick!* At age twelve, already an office tyrant, humorless, punitive, scowling over a retail empire; that is, until Preston, the cabin's third baseman, leading hitter, and full-time bully, had his credit application rejected, and then, well, Preston exploded, leaped onto Stick's bunk, grabbed the sacred objects and scattered them into the air, whereupon the rest of us joined the riot, stealing fistfuls of inventory and slinking back to our bunks, looters and cowards all.

There was a price to pay, however. Even after our winning season in baseball, after dominating the league: with Preston homering in eight straight games and Baggy, Sandy, Turtle, Winston, everyone, myself included, slashing line drives and doubles, beating out infield singles, to set a camp record for hits and wins. (Stick, who spent the rest of the season moribund and mute, couldn't harm the team batting average, and once, during a string of twenty-three strikeouts, received two walks.)

I knew that Stick was in hell. I had been Preston's victim the previous summer. I knew Preston's methods, the steady progression of his terrorism, the sneak attacks when you were returning from the canteen, the Indian wrestling that ended in chokeholds, bruises, and tears. His sudden appearances from nowhere just when you thought you were safe.

Worst of all was his charisma. Preston's flashing smile had magnetized us! He was the team hero, for God's sake. Not just baseball but basketball, swimming, archery. His batting average was .556! The only course open to Stick was a session of therapeutic counseling with Mrs. Carrington, the owner's wife, the sole woman at camp (other than the cooks and the nurse), who hovered over us as a grandmotherly symbol of tenderness and home. Mostly seven- and eight-year-olds visited her in the owner's resi-

"Untitled (Lake McDonald)," by Cobi Moules. Courtesy of the artist

dence beyond the cafeteria down a wooden walkway. Night weepers, bed wetters, and runaways found comfort in her lap along with a cup of hot chocolate.

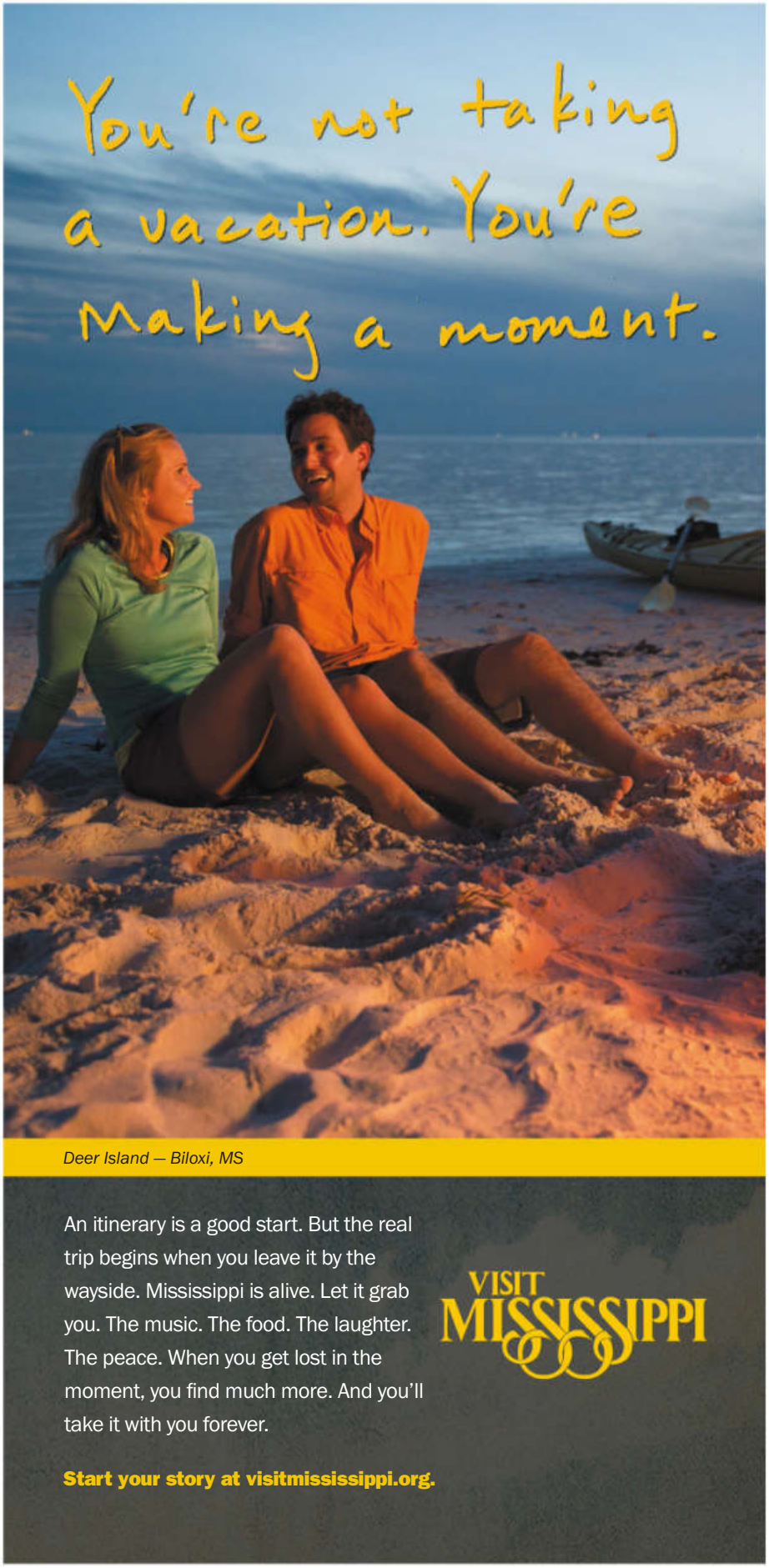
The rest of us considered it babyish and unsporting to seek out Mrs. Carrington. If you had a problem, you were supposed to tough it out on your own. One evening after Song Hour, after "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" and "Kumbaya," I noticed Stick pacing alone on the walkway leading to the residence. I knew what he was doing: trying to work up the courage to knock on Mrs. Carrington's door and have a good cry. I had paced those same boards the summer before.

I watched him for several minutes, but the evening movie was about to begin, a Randolph Scott Western that I didn't want to miss. In truth, I didn't like Stick. He was a hoarder of goods and a liability on the ball field. I don't know if he went in to see Mrs. Carrington that night and had his cup of hot chocolate, but I do know that his days of misery at the hands of Preston continued right up to the last day of camp, and the awarding of the league trophy to the Eagles.

When I got home at the end of the summer and unpacked my footlocker, I found one of Stick's model airplanes among my own gear. The plane was an unassembled P-38, still in the box. On the back was a bookplate stamped in tiny print with Stick's real name: *F. A. Malone, 4227 State St., Brainard, Florida.*

Later that week my mother gave me a large brown envelope that she'd bought at the stationery store. I printed Stick's name and address and then my own name and address on the envelope in the correct places, then inserted the airplane and licked the flap, adding several strips of Scotch tape for good measure. Somehow, I lost the package before I ever made it to the post office—left it in someone's backyard or threw it in the trash by mistake.

For a moment I wondered if perhaps Stick was the problem, if he was simply the kind of person who would go on being tyrannized and exploited for the rest of his life. Then I told myself that anyone could lose an envelope and, besides, Stick doubtless owned more toys than he knew what to do with. If pressed on the subject, I would have had to admit that the item was Stick's legal property, and that I had failed him by not returning it. In the end, I knew by that point in the summer, one more betrayal of him, give or take, wouldn't make any difference.



LOCAL FARE

How to Read a Menu

BY JOHN T. EDGE

When I told my wife, Blair, about Antibellum L.A., the dining project that Samuel Monsour occasionally hosts at the Hotel Figueroa in downtown Los Angeles, she listened politely as I recited the chef's Twitter cri de coeur: "Old South inspired Pop-Up Restaurant Heartened by an Era Troubled with Suffering yet Rich with Soul." Instead of taking the bait, she asked, "Do the waitresses wear hoop cheese skirts?" making the sort of dismissive joke that comes naturally to a small-town Alabama girl who grew up weary of antebellum fantasy craft.

Across town, The Ladies' Gunboat Society, another restaurant, began channeling a similar ethic in the summer of 2014. Besha Rodell of *LA Weekly* reported that the "mouthful of a moniker refers to a group of women who, frustrated with their relative helplessness during the Civil War, raised funds to build ironclad gunboats to protect the harbors of the Confederate South." Jonathan Gold of the *Los Angeles Times* summarized the promise this way: "The South continues to rise. Fried chicken for all."

This is not the first moment of vogue for Southern theme restaurants. It's merely the latest clock tick in an ongoing cycle. Reading menus that I've collected over the years or sourced from various archives, four periods come into focus. Each burst of restaurant making and menu writing came during a time of social and economic upheaval, when old sureties were challenged and identities were in flux.

The first came during World War II, as military investment in the region lifted the country from the Depression and the South fitfully joined the national economy. The second spanned the years between the 1954 Brown decision and the rollout of Nixon's 1968 Southern strategy. A third boomlet, a correction really, coincided with the 1976 election of Jimmy Carter and extended to the early 1980s when chefs like Louis Osteen at Pawleys Island, South Carolina, began honestly interpreting the region and its larder. The more recent burst of creativity has been the longest. It began in the late 1990s, one generation after the civil rights movement peaked, gained momentum with the rise of the Charleston food scene and the post-Katrina rebirth of New Orleans, and found its mettle in the 2010s as chefs inside and outside the region began to spend as much time in the library as they do in the kitchen.

We've now entered the abstract phase of this culinary rebirth, in which the idea of Southern food is as fungible and bankable as the food itself. Some of the most interesting work is being done beyond the geographic borders. Up in Boston, over in Chicago, out in Los Angeles, chefs get room to maneuver, and the South in general and the Old South in particular benefit from an historical untethering, a sort of deracination in which "The South will rise again" does not sound like a rallying cry for demagogues but a cute little turn of phrase.

Beyond the region (and, if we're being really honest, within its cultural bounds, too) fried chicken does not play like a complicated icon of black expertise, entrepreneurship, and stereotype. Instead, it's now a meme to be mimicked, a trend to be exploited. Like bluegrass music in Japan or a Thornton Dial assemblage pulled from his Bessemer, Alabama, garage and hung at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, the craft benefits from the remove and the framing but loses something in the translation.

Until recently, the South lagged behind other regions of the country. Culinary tourism did not prove a draw. In the deeper South, early adoption of Prohibition thwarted the growth of upscale dining. Southern restaurants played well out west, though. The Coon Chicken Inn, which began in Salt Lake City and expanded to Seattle and Portland, flourished by the 1920s, selling coon-fried chicken from roadhouses fronted by walk-through caricature busts of black bellhops. Carl's Viewpark in Los Angeles, billed as the "world's finest drive-in restaurant," and popular in the 1930s, was built to resemble a columned manse and was fronted by a self-styled "Old South colonnade." On Melrose Avenue, Carolina Pines built its reputation on "darky help and Southern Cookery."

Aunt Fanny's Cabin in suburban Atlanta gained fame for fried chicken and rosin potatoes, poached in pine tree sap, served in a country manor interior, accessorized with tchotchkes and primitives. (A generation later, Cracker Barrel, a Tennessee-based chain, earned its reputation with the same method and, come to think of it, a comparable aesthetic hustle.) Founded in 1941 by Isoline Campbell McKenna, Aunt Fanny's flourished during World War II when the Bell Bomber plant opened nearby, and reached its zenith in the 1950s, when Harvey Hester, a Falstaffian proprietor who curried favor with celebrities, ran the operation.

Under his direction, black women in white gowns gathered around the piano to sing gospel music and shake Mason jars for tips. And black boys worked the dining room with menu boards yoked over their necks, sing-songing the offerings: "Howdy folks, what'll it be? All complete dinners, our famous fried chicken, gen-u-wine Smithfield ham, charcoal broiled steak, fresh rainbow trout." (I know the exact phrase because it's inscribed on a frosted mint julep glass that I purchased for five bucks at a junk sale.)

The menus printed by Mammy's Shanty, which in addition to the Atlanta flagship ran four Florida locations by the late 1950s, were pithy narratives of Louisiana turkey and rice a la Alexandria and a Georgia cracker sampler plate



"Burning Calories - Fried Chicken" (2013), by Henry Hargreaves and Amirah Kassem

that suggested tourists who longed to have another go should "Save your Confederate money like the rest of us." Chicken shortcake Natchez was teleported from a day when "crinoline and hoop skirts were in vogue and Jean Lafitte was pirating around New Orleans." Lafitte wasn't looking for gold. "No suh, he was looking for a Natchez Negro Mammy who could make Chicken Shortcake handed down from the Good Old Days." (It came as no surprise when I learned that James Earl Ray, the man who murdered Martin Luther King Jr., was a regular at Mammy's Shanty. He had two receipts from the restaurant when arrested.)

In the 1960s, when the centennial of the Civil War and the signal years of the civil rights movement entwined like combatants in an awkward headlock, Johnny Reb's was in its neo-Confederate prime. One of the four Atlanta restaurants operated under that banner erected a sign, topped with two butternut gray uniformed mannequins, muzzle-loading what appeared to be an actual cannon. Beneath, outlined in light bulbs, blinked the word DIXIELAND.

A portrait of Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest, C.S.A., dominated the menu front, which opened to reveal a chicken giblet soup, said to be handed down from the wife of General Robert E. Lee. Sirloins were ordered Shermanized (burned to a crisp), Lincolnized (warm, red heart), and Stonewalled (rare). Across town, Johnny Reb's Charcoal Broiler sold Confederate fried chicken. "It's new . . . it's different," promised newspaper advertisements, seemingly unaware of the irony of pegging a century-old Confederate ideal as being somehow innovative.

These Southern pageant restaurants prospered in the latter half of the twentieth century. And they broadcast staying power over ensuing decades. Later iterations were generally more subtle. Mammy's Shanty, which fronted its early menus with kerchiefed mammies and watermelon-eating children, had begun printing a more subdued scene by 1969. A washed-out watercolor of the restaurant dominated the foreground. In the background, the skyscrapers of Atlanta loomed, symbols of encroaching modernity.

The city of Atlanta did not enjoy a lock on happy darky days theme dining. Scarlett O'Hara, set in a retrofitted Great Lakes steamship, decked out in crushed velour and velvet, floated off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1970s. When it opened in 1973, the restaurant played up *Gone with the Wind* conceits, advertising "Rhett Butler's notorious blockade runner returns to Charleston harbor." But overt homages to the Old South were few. The most offensive thing on the menu was the insult to the French language of "Frogs' Legs Provencale, Sauce Fantastique." Not everyone gave up the ghost. As late as 1985, Old Plantation Barbecue in Birmingham tended a crop of cotton in the parking lot. A sign invited: "Watch this cotton grow." A second sign, mounted on the roof eave, proclaimed, "Yas Sur, it's cooked in de pit." Back in Atlanta, Aunt Fanny's Cabin staged its nightly shuck and jive until 1994.

Atlanta was the citadel city for pageant restaurants, which makes good sense when you think about how quickly "the city too busy to hate" changed over the last half-century. More than any other urban center, immigration and economic reinvention buffeted the Georgia capital. In the face of swift change, the white conservatives of the city grew nostalgic for a past that was long faded, or maybe never was. And they indulged that nostalgia while dining in restaurants, the same spaces employed by black protestors of the early 1960s, well aware of the theatrical possibilities.

As the sociologist John Shelton Reed has pointed out, "The South has changed faster than the rest of the country in these last few decades, and Southerners are distinguished now by a more extensive experience with rapid social and economic change." Reed wasn't speaking specifically about Atlanta when he made that observation. But he did give thought to the city's complicity in what C. Vann Woodward called the "Bulldozer Revolution." In the run-up to the 1996 Olympics, Reed said, "Every time I look at Atlanta, I see what a quarter of a million Confederate soldiers died to prevent."

I have yet to make it to one of Samuel Monsour's Antibellum L.A. dinners. The menus posted online are populated with all the right nouns and branded with all the right provenance tags. As in "Guinea hen ballotine, benne souya, country sausage, spring-dug root veg, redeye demi." The use of benne, a grain vogue among progressive chefs, signals that Monsour recognizes the African roots of Southern food. The redeye is a nod to the mountain South, where hams are hung in clapboard smokehouses and breakfast biscuits often come drenched in a slurry of ham grease, sugar, and coffee. That dish sounds just as delicious as his cri de coeur sounds senseless.

When I take a step back from that mod menu writing, though, I recognize Monsour's pop-up is a plantation pageant restaurant for the twenty-first century, a throwback repackaged for this multicultural moment. Or, as he puts it, "By embodying techniques, staple foods, and indigenous ingredients of Spanish, French, West African, Native American, and Caribbean cuisines, Antibellum presents diners with an experience rooted in the genesis of Southern cuisine."

I did recently dine at Pittypat's Porch, a downtown *Gone with the Wind*–themed restaurant. It's the last of the pageant palaces still doing business in Atlanta. Founded in 1967, three years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation in public accommodations, it is, by some measures, the oldest continuously operating restaurant in the city. (By those measures, the Varsity, founded in 1928, is not a restaurant, but a drive-in.)

A. J. Anthony, the founder, was a Czech immigrant. Set in a onetime funeral home, his first location of Pittypat's Porch featured menus printed on church fans. Service was on pewter plates. Appetizers included headcheese, served from a buffet. Anthony wasn't fully assimilated, though. Until at least the mid-1970s, menus misspelled the word y'all, placing the apostrophe between the a and the first l.

Carpetbagger steaks, stuffed with oysters, came with souvenir skillets. Mint juleps, guaranteed to make you "feel like a plantation owner," arrived in logo mugs. Ankle breakers, named after Stonewall Jackson, said to have fallen and shattered his ankle after downing a half-dozen of the drinks, came in ceramic jugs with skull-and-bones stoppers.

By the time I sipped my first cocktail in the Rocking Chair Lounge, while listening to a canned version of "Doraville" by the Atlanta Rhythm Section, Pittypat's Porch no longer possessed the ability to aggrieve. Like the Cyclorama, the Battle of Atlanta depiction erected in the late nineteenth century as a celebration of Confederate valor, now owned by the City of Atlanta and operated by a staff that's predominately African-American, Pittypat's has also been cleansed of overt racial taint.

As I descended the stairs from the lounge to the dining room, I glimpsed a signed glossy of John Lewis, the crusading civil rights leader and U.S. representative, mounted by the balustrade. When I ordered "Chef David's Tara Combo" of fried chicken and a half rack of ribs, I learned that the David in question, walking through the dining room like he owned the place, was David Myree, a thirty-plus-year veteran of African-American descent. Scanning the menu, I locked on the black bottom pie, expecting some veiled insult, but finding, instead, whipped cream and chocolate custard.

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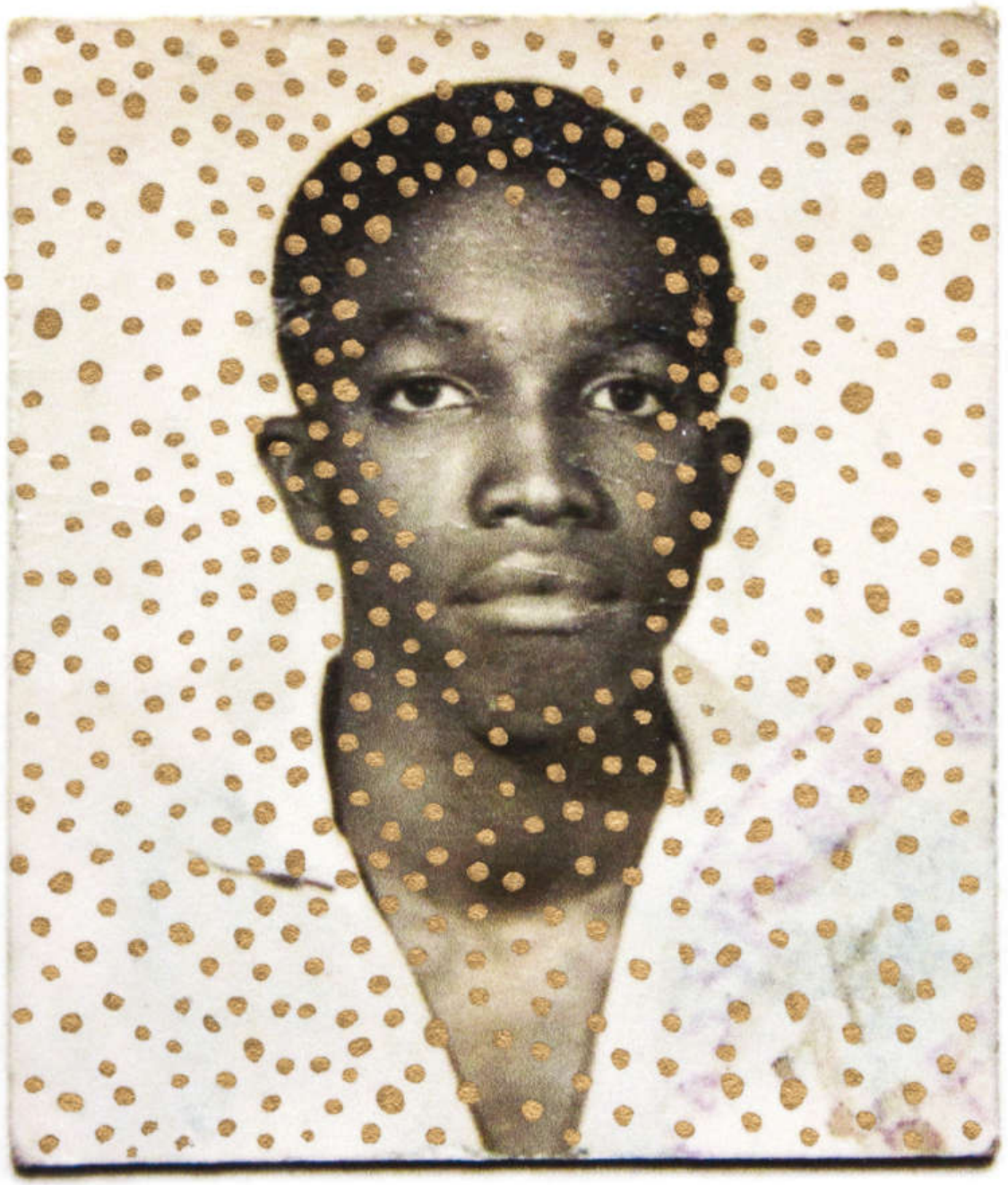
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"Untitled," from the series *Passports*, by Keisha Scarville

HOW THE BATTLE OF AND FOR THE BLACK FACE BOY CAME TO BE

BY NIKKY FINNEY

The slow dance of the Civil War and the enslavement of Black people in America are my working metaphors for the poem known as *The Battle of and for the Black Face Boy.*

The barbaric act of restricting a human being by chaining and confining as many as possible in a finite space is founded on the mathematics of profit. Mathematics, which includes adding, subtracting, and division, is one of the main roads used to calculate profit. Profit is the mother and father of war and capitalism. The space and spatial rules and regulations regarding the enslavement of Black people, two hundred and fifty years ago, can be connected to the space and spatial rules and regulations regarding the movement of Black people in modern America.

The world of the enslaved African in America did not include safety, security, or the encouragement to create. Black people had to find and hold on to those things themselves. The horrific world of Black slavery of the nineteenth century is reported to have been emancipated, but instead it seems to have been simply modernized, by catastrophic, quotidian, state-sanctioned violence against millions of Black citizens. Those enslaved human beings and their children, who stepped from slavery into the Civil War, into Reconstruction, into Jim Crow, into the water hoses of the civil rights movement, now step into the streets of Ferguson and Florida, Baltimore and Charleston, holding a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old sign that reads an ancient, long-ignored truth: BLACK LIVES MATTER.

In 2013, I was commissioned by the Clarice Smith Center at the University of Maryland to write a libretto in honor of the sesquicentennial end of the Civil War. The university had joined the national celebration that was already scheduling concerts and performances across the country in 2015. *The Battle of and for the Black Face Boy* became my offering. An incredibly long list of names of young Black men, shot and killed by police and security guards across the country, was kicking me in my heart. The facts of their deaths and lives shook me. Their names and their formerly alive smiling faces, their cornrows, baseball caps, chocolate hoodies, their perfect moon-shaped afros escorted me through my day. The voices of their mothers, speaking of their sweet and funny Black sons, became a somber score that filled my head.

I imagined a radical libretto made of Civil War history, Black history, and modern American headlines. The voice of the historical narrator begins. The voice of the Black Face Boy enters as sonic soliloquy. The narrator and the first-person voice of the Black Face Boy enter into a radical libretto call and response. Great leaps of time are found in each stanza, and a twelve-page album of faces and geographies is set to the music of battles and human discoveries. Nothing is linear because time, history, and truth do not happen in a capsule or a vacuum. At the heart of this radical libretto sits this: The institution of American slavery not only lit the fuse of fighting known as the Civil War, but the question of who could own another human being remained at the heart of this war and remains at the heart of America in 2015. The question of who gets to move like a free person and who gets to move in chains remains ensconced in our everyday American lives one hundred and fifty years later.

The shooting of young Black men and women has continued ad nauseam. The disregard for Black life has not slowed but surged. In June, in Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church, in Charleston, South Carolina, on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean where millions of enslaved Africans first arrived against their will, ninety miles away from where I was born and where I have now returned to teach and write, nine church members attending Bible study were shot by a twenty-one-year-old white male, who had, in the confidence of friends and the Internet, professed a great desire to begin a second Civil War. After being invited into the church by loving, embracing, gracious Black people, who were spiritually, if not literally, children of the Africans who had been violently forced across the Atlantic two hundred and fifty years before in the name of profit. He sat with them and listened to them before he killed them. He must have heard their voices speak of God's undying love as he pulled out his cannon of a gun, raised his Confederate flag over their heads, and pulled the trigger.

I wanted to write a poem that traveled from the horror of one day to the lifting of our chins the next—that paid homage to how we keep moving; keep stepping forward; inventing whatever is next to invent; constructing, fashioning iron chains into wings; how we continue to fold and shape into a future what has been kept from us, regardless of the brutality that still chases us.

THE BATTLE OF AND FOR ★★★ THE ★★★ BLACK FACE BOY

BY NIKKY FINNEY

Black boys needed to turn swamp forest into white gold!

In 1851 he is stopped and frisked,
packed inside the ice of iron,
in the hull of the *Jesus,* on his back
eighteen hours a day, one hundred
and ninety-two days, he has three
square feet of space and ten vertical
inches of air, the cat-o-nine tails
whips away, the jaws of the speculum
oris feed him horse pea mush,
startlingly, strike with wonder,
he is alive, the devil is beaten out
of his father, sharks nose the water
for his boat, one hundred times as
many black face boys thrown overboard
will eventually make the passage,
the new world's cardinal child is robust,
disposable, appraised and weighed,
in great supply,

Open wide black face boy, open wide, our brave new world will make great use of you!

I twist to my right looking for my father who is no longer three rows over. Another boy my height and weight chained wrist to ankle has split open the back of his head by beating it against the wooden planks beneath us. His eyes have pitched and quaked and rolled back now. Once on shore my name is Lawless and I am barely breathing. They stand me up in a vat of palm oil. My black face is the first microchip. It will be rubbed and watched for more than two hundred years. As long as I wear this black face they can find me anywhere. I have been hauled here by them for them. It is illegal for me to be outside without them. It is against the law for me to wear clothes with a pocket. A pocket is for privacy and mine was stripped and thrown behind me in the salt waves. Now that we are one big family a pass or a civil war will be required to zigzag cotton into wool. On slave row I am marched to my strip of red dirt floor. I am given my three square feet of space and my ten vertical inches of air. In an almost dead boy's dream curl I drink down the free hips of black women patted and swirled in African coconut dust. Daylight comes. Plantation people walk by stiffly in long ruffled skirts and top hats that hide the sweet sway of the body. I grow into a man and learn they call this *manners* and *grace.*

The women plundered with him
are opened and entered like fish
mouths, his sisters are swept and
blown into the air like dandelion,
pussy willows, weeping willows,
black-eyed Susan willows, each
will grow furiously, dangerously,
across the mantle of the new land,
peony girls will pop, top heavy
hydrangea women, drenched in
indigo and poppy, fluttering inside
the dark-eyed suckle of sugar
and cane, their motion picture
hips throwing seed,

Black boy rubbed back alive, rubbed up for luck, rubbed on for sale and battle!

It is the age of cotton futures,
iron slave collars and copper
yoke bracelets, the foreheads of
black face boys are tattooed with
the bone white of the master's
initials, BMI, he hears them talking
through their sweet tea liquor
vote *no* to the Union and *yes*
to keeping slaves in their fields
(in their beds), Generals Lee,
Beauregard, Stonewall Jackson,
John Hunt Morgan, the cotton
Confederacy lifts into the orange
air of the Republic, pointing
a rusty 1861 *Kill Every Nigger*
Tillman gubernatorial submarine,

Slavery now! Slavery tomorrow! Slavery forever! Slavery on the moon!

Four score and forever I am told to never look him in his eye. A clamp is kept on my mouth. I learn to count on the rest of my staring body for everything that I need to live. I forget their eye-rules sometimes when he divides us up and sends us away from each other like biddies. I draw my chin up just enough to see what kind of creature is standing before me. I have to look at him to make sure I never forget. After I look he beats me at the whipping tree for staring. I raise my chin and stare again at his backside as he walks away. What kind of creature could pull a mother from the fingers of her child or a husband from the elbows of his wife? Into the back of his neck and shoulders I send my eyes to remind him there will be no forgetting what he has done. Before he turns and catches me staring again I stagger back to the wagon to strap

on the mule's harness that is my coat and move on down the row.
I need none of his pockets for the keeping of these plantation
black and whites.

The age of enlightenment is over,
here comes the time of civil war
pell-mell, the battle of Ft. Sumter,
the delicate dance of the cakewalk,
jump and jute, collide, mid-air,
Charleston's cannon balls, African
banjos, English lutes break the air
in one accord, the age of cotton and
peach preserve, the birth of war
paint and dead arm photography
take the floor, pale humans curtsy,
bow, flash, grin, then shoot each
other in the face, the music of the
age is classical, arguing who is and
is not free, the plentiful, unsurpassed,
forever calculating, black face boy,
is now and forever,
dragged center stage,

Henceforth and forever more the Republic can never afford to be disinterested in black face boys!

A joint announcement is made,
black face on black face boys
from this day forward shall be
the Republic's prototype, usufruct,
his instincts and his chemistry,
will be used to sell tobacco,
hot dogs, box seats, toothpaste,
all in his persuasive name, used
to calculate how to boldly break
the union, sweetly save the union,
ink amendments, acquire but
never allow the Siamese twins
Freedom & Equality to marry,
ink declarations and squander
proclamations, South to North,
everyone agrees off record that
he will never be much to crow
about, but they will never take
their eyes off him, never will he
be *forever free,* and everywhere he
tries to move the music of his
soft tapping feet will sound out
train trestle, iron bells, smokestack,
gold coins, siren bullets, panic,
what they can sell of him will be
well marked, but never will any
black face boy parts be labeled



"Jamey's Horse," Maringouin, Louisiana (1997), by Jack Spencer

leading or man, black skin,
the Republic's first microchip
is strategically placed, is
working very well,

Black face boy the world is changing but we still have a great and growing use for you!

> My black skin is the kind that won't wash off on or off their minstrel stage of war. I will stay black. Will keep myself alive. Will move upstream with the living. Will will my black body into our great fight for freedom. This Lawless son knows that to fight is to belong. I belong. To my first life. To this nowadays life. To the next life coming fast. I will keep imagining a future with a pocket and without a pass. I will keep moving this black boy body. In my night sleep my feet push on up the road and the dirt floor hears me. Some throats are cut every night. Some songs play on every morning.

Stripped of culture, hulled of
history, shucked of language,
religion, the black face boy
begins to make himself all
over again, from okra seeds
dry tucked beneath his Atlantic
Ocean tongue, from liars' tongues,
from black and blue memory,
he takes flour from the cotton
boll, milk from cow teats, odd
and end iron from the hull of
the *Jesus,* eggs and gristle from
beneath warm wet feathers in
the coop (necessary for flight),
the wishbone of a frying chicken
is pushed way down inside his
woolly hair for height, luck, sass,
a mountain climbing attitude,
there has never been one who
had to make himself all over,
from okra and rice, for this he
should be called Sweet Son of
the New World, Sweet Evening
Prancing Star Gazelle, Mr. Boy
Liberty, Sweet Delicious Titanic
Man-To-Be, Son of Mr. Swagger
& Mr. Dash, the Republic's silent
cinematic heartthrob,

Step forward Nigger! Save your country! The Recruitment poster rings out!

The war blooms, fragrant rotten
Technicolor collision, out-a-sight
black face boys are renamed *Contraband*
and the *Great Available,* the tall
bearded statesman from Kentucky
lines them up on land and sea, but
every white face North and South
fears replacing the hoe in his black
hand with an even blacker musket,
Ball's Bluff, the battles of Whereas
and Heretofore are coming fast,
the age of iron peeled off his black
neck and pushed into a black barrel
is here, the black face boy will step
out and fight his way to freedom
but he wonders if history will
ever carte-de-visite the many
black boy ways he's
had to move,

General Lee paints graffiti on a recruitment poster when no one is looking. Just underneath a black face he writes, whispering as he scrawls, "You are now and forever our great disposable!"

The patent pending president
invents a hoisting machine,
fascinated with gadgetry, incendiary
weapons, he has a penchant for
freedom and metaphor, ironclad
warships, and aerial reconnaissance,
he fights with breech loading
cannons, placing his black face
boys squarely on the flaming
checkerboard of the Republic,
hoisting them up and over,
and in, and there, and down,
wherever, however, needed,

Repeat after me: We are engaged in a great Civil War. Say it again! Again!

After Big Bethel and Wilmington,
Hoke's Run, Bull's Run, Camp
Wildcat, the hidden horrors of
Andersonville, the massacre at
Ft. Pillow, 2 x 3, six hundred
hearts beneath six hundred sets
of surrendering black arms, high
eye in the air, shot down, the battle
of and for the black face boy
moves into the heat and heart
of the every day war, the feuding
brothers believe they are fighting
for honor, love of and for their

different ways of life, suffering
and pride turn rivers and streams
ruby white & blue, back and forth,
they win, they lose, they blame
each other, whole families burn
whole families down, four years of
muck and misery,

The black face boy is why we are here. He is the cake of all our trouble!

June 20 1864 Private William Johnson who walked away from camp without a pass is escorted back to his own private tree. On a high up hill in plain sight of the witnessing Confederate line the Union stops the war to hang him by his black face neck. Willie Johnson is charged with what I Lawless will be charged with one hundred and fifty years next. It is the black face boy's charge. Rape + Walking Away. It is a brother's fight we have been pulled inside the heart of. *A point must be made* is what the brothers say around their fire pits after Willie swings high in the air above them. Before they cut him down they say liquor loud so that every black face boy yet unborn including me can hear *Just because a man thinks he is a man he can not walk away regular—here and there—like other men.*

On Navy ships a black face boy
is called a *Hand,* the first he hears
of this his fingers touch the tar
of his own cheeks there in the
dark sea of night, a full blueberry
moon bent over his set shoulders,
Denmark Vesey stands starboard
holding David Walker's Appeal,
out on the open water 18,000
black face boys and 11 black face
girls sign up to sail, to fight in
freedom's fight, once on deck
they boldly learn how to walk
without a pass, their pants are
finally made of deep pocket wool,
they volunteer to step the length
of the cutter all night with their
shoulders pulled back free, new
free black walking human flags,
flags in a brand new free black
wind, port to port they close their
eyes, feel their bodies push away
from chains and cotton to a new
horizon no longer on pause, alive,
reel-to-reel—

Papa Quincy is always there to keep me moving. The flashing storied images of him walking the wet salty planks of a ship in his navy pea coat. His flat cap with matching red flared scarf stained heavy with the ivory of guts and dried whale blood. Not all of us came by chains. Four hundred counted here and there with whale tattoos from another day and time. A time when black face boys were given hunting spears without fear of whose flesh the tip would tear. His whale soaked face making him a maritime man. Long before any uncivil war pushed to name anyone who looked like him *Contraband.* He fought the humpback and the blue for their sweet burning oil not Confederates for their blackened cotton. The story that traveled to me told that he knew John Robert Bond of Liverpool who enlisted to "help free the slaves." So many black boys wearing the knot of the Navy in order to slip the knot of the noose. Never shackled on his back for eighteen hours. Never chained in the ice of iron for one hundred and ninety-two days. These ones sailed and reached back for black faces just like their own. On the high seas there were black literate sailors reaching for Philadelphia newsprint and any word of their brothers chained away in the South. I see Quincy Lawless whenever I move through any minute of my day. I stride to his side without thinking and stare into his history. Whispering as he leans over the ship's railing to read to the black face men that I will never know. He uses his long black pointing finger as he holds tightly to all of us with every word *O' yes O' yes one day dear brothers of the bottom land you too will belong.*

Niggers in wool riding on ships! Next thing you know they'll want God's sweet acres and Bess his mule!

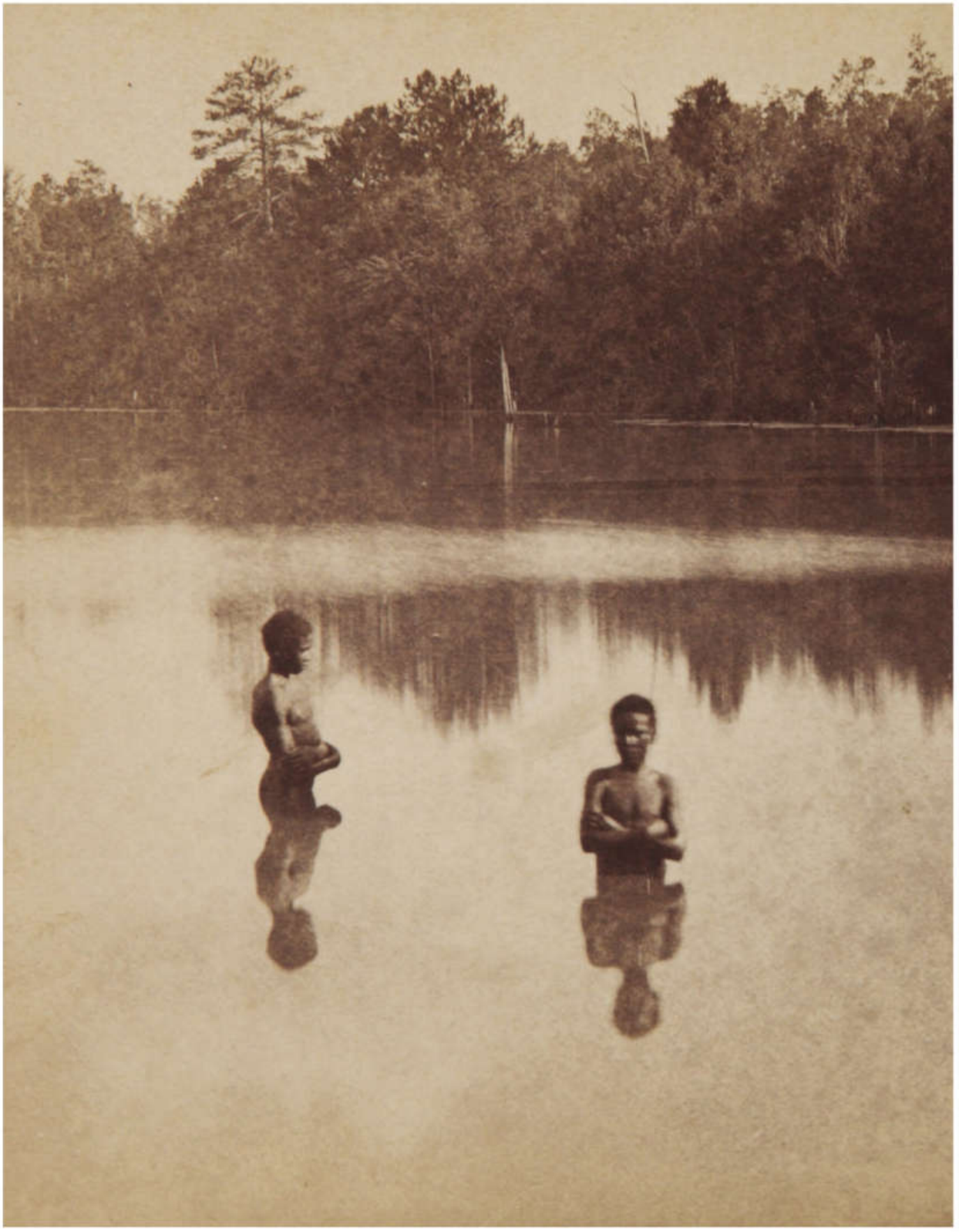
It is the age of the final count,
under the silk of Alabama fields,
beside the charcoal of Tennessee
streams, in Maryland pushback
sand, inside the Potomac, the long
brown thigh of the Mississippi,
750,000 bodies of brothers and
ex-slaves, side by side, five hundred
thousand more hacked by war,
now bandaged and wandering
hospitals and field stations, there,
nineteen black boy legs cut away
atop a pile of all white arms, here,
one teal blue eye motionless in a
honey jar, staring across the room
at one black boy, eyeless, but alive,
on the floor,
squat and bleating,

We still need you black face boy! In wartime! In Peacetime! You are truly boy of boys!

It is the age of electricity,
Black Mary moves quietly out on
the dust bowl prairie, the kneeling
Confederate flag is really a rusty
1865 Tillman submarine sinking
into the deep, *Kill Every Nigger* is
now disappearing beneath the
bubbly pearl of waves, General Lee
takes up his pen at Appomattox
to finally sign the old etiquette
of the Old South away, promising
to, in the future, give black face
boys more than three square feet
of space and ten vertical inches
of air, the new promise fools the
Republic into believing all involved
have left the darkness behind,
all have not, but if you throw your
eyes far enough, word on the western
prairie promises, Black Mary rides
roughshod on wooden pulsar wheels,
she and her black woman stagecoach
delivering mail to the outer banks
Republic and the tumbleweed nuns,
a shotgun squared between her legs,
a tobacco pipe is barbed wired
between her lips,

Soon it will be the age of moving
pictures and television, and after
that the battle of the newest steam
engineered trains arriving late at the
station, COLORED & WHITE
will peer atop every southern water
fountain, black face boys and girls
will march and sing to the drumming
of water hoses while levitating
shoeless across the Edmund Pettus
concrete lift, desiring immediate
adoption of the Republic's illegitimate
moon-faced cousins,
FREEDOM & EQUALITY—

At 109 Uncle Julius Lawless called it the age of black chicken skin. Everybody listening and remembering on the porch was nervous. They had a feeling trouble in double doses was on its way. First a black face boy from Atlanta took his last walk on his last balcony in Memphis. Then two more black face boys stepped up to the winner's block to raise their black-gloved fists over Mexico City. Grandma says the age of plastic has cometh and ice is now melting on continents where ice has never melted before. Even I know the waters of the world are beginning to churn with our greed and ignorance. Dynamite and exclusion have become the



Untitled photograph (c.a. 1875), by J. N. Wilson. From the Randolph Linsly Simpson African-American collection at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library

national rage. Four little girls from Bombingham have been watching over us in their flaming Sunday school dresses for fifty years. The black face boys I know know little has changed even with all the changes. The black face boys I know know their great uncles walked from West Virginia to Washington with their inventions in their arms and on their backs. Our music and our perfect calculations pushing the mean world ahead.

You are never to be trusted black face boy. You are guilty of things that haven't even happened yet!

It is the age of liars, co-liars, fear,
gun shows dot the land like golden
bales of amber wheat, the Republic
is deeply worried about the gates
of the old city, it used to be clear
who could walk in without a pass
and who could not, who could stay
and work with or without a pocket
or a pass and who could not,
who could vote and who could be
Mr. President, it used to be easy
to tell who was who (in their beds),
black face boys know who they are,
they are the sons of men, just like
other sons know, they are boys who
want what other boys want, the wild
freedom to invent, to freely be them-
selves, the freedom to not have one
thing in their pocket needed to get
safely home, the freedom to have
nothing to prove, to play basketball
freely, to not play dead every night
while freely walking home late from
the free hoop park, the freedom
to never hide their heart, their hands,
their heroes, or their wicked walking
on their high horse haunches,
that free bow legged walk that makes
black boy country waves, the black
boy freedom to weave, swagger,
swerve and not be stopped, not be
tasered down (blessed be what the
cell phone sees), running-for-their-life
black boys, still given three square feet
of space and ten inches of
black boy air,

We will never give you room. The only war ever fought here at home was about making room for you. Now! You are it!

It is the 8th age of extinction,
scientists are bringing the woolly
mammoth back, prison cities
rise on the Republic's new map,
newly coined black face boys
spend their days locked down,
side by side, on their Atlantic
Ocean backs, eighteen hours
on federal concrete, human forks
and spoons, living out their time
in the new ice of new iron,
black boys with back pockets
and front, it is the age of not
enough black face boy poets,
tea salesmen and fresco painters,
the age of electric cars and electric
black face boys, the age of shooting
black face boys in their black electric
faces and backs, the Republic's
new red velvet big tent show,
the age of white boys growing up
on the treble and bass of black
boy songs, while black boys now
and in the future, never get to grow
up, black boys who are gunned
down by the fathers of those,
buying and listening to their music,
shot again as they knock on the
door of the Republic needing help
with a dead battery, *Honey, he says*
all he needs
is a jump,

Jump black face boy! Jump! Nobody jumps as high as a black face boy!

Through the peephole the Republic peeps at me. Junior Lawless of the dark woolly-haired crew. Lawless Jr. of the woolly dark-eyed caravan. Whenever they look at me they see Civil War. Rape. The great historical dismissive black boy walk away. When they shoot me and leave me in the street for four hours facedown on the hot summer pavement while my mother screams on the porch they see sugar plantations melting in the distance. They see cotton fields handed over to boll weevils on a British silver platter. They see money on fire. They see their great granddaddy's wooden arm and bloodshot eyes in a ditch. They see their great grandmothers facedown in the red mud cotton rose fabric hiked up to her hip. They see me coming and want to go Civil War on me. When I walk in they see a musket loaded between my legs ready to shoot. They see Sherman walking on baby blue water down to the sea. They see my black body and they see 10000 bloody trenches in tow filled with white boy body parts. My nappy loud hair is the

51000 of Gettysburg still rotting in the field. My double sub-woofers and tweeters playing The Notorious B.I.G. at 50 decibels is the 23000 shot in twelve hours at Antietam. They see me in black shiny neon skin. They see me and trouble tickertapes like sea smoke through their annual Confederate reenactments. All because of me. Me and my little need to be free.

It is the age of wily Wall Street,
the Republic strikes up the money
making band needing to sell nothing
for something, that is what profit is,
so the deep pockets of the Republic
think future and focus on music
and muscle, once again the Republic
fixes its blue eyes on the sons of
black face boys, those who first
aroused the first big money micro-
chip, a whole country founded on
their rich black skin, immediately
they separate those who can run,
pass, and jump and perhaps even
hold a high velvet note, from those
whose black faces are not smooth
enough and must stick to selling
fake Civil War memorabilia
on the corner,

Look away now boy, look away, remember, don't look me in the eye, look away now boy, look away!

It is the age of surrender,
black face boys, still in great
supply are made into the new
Republic's old moneymaker,
"Heads" he stays and entertains,
"Tails" he goes to jail, the black
face boys on the corner with
trinkets and souvenirs to sell,
first resist, then remember,
then get busy reinventing,
like their fathers, they can only
use their minds and what is left
on their backsides as tool and
dye, they loosen and lower their
pants beyond the Republic's
legal hip line, cinching the sail
cloth of their whaling fathers
in their left hand, while pushing
their black boy freestanding
legs out in front to the right,
they know not to run unless
a metronome game clock ticks
in tandem with every leap,

but their legs can't help it,
they move in black face boy
stride and time,

Like a pod of black face whales
moving through an oil slick,
they move in silent refusal of
their generation's allotment of
their three square feet of space,
their ten vertical inches of air,
this up-to-date, still disposable,
abreast-of-the-times, foremost,
black face boy, this cardinal son,
is not seduced by cannon fire,
suffering or death, he knows
what he knows and he knows
what the Republic will never
admit, he knows what and who
the cherished beloved is, he was
there when it was built, he built
it, when the only thing there
was dirt, to dig, to move, to sleep
on, when the only thing there was
sun up and sun down, was dreams
to chase out of his head, a cotton
tom-tom pounding, the sound
of slaves ringing up on cold cash
registers before sinking to the
bottom of the Atlantic, was whips,
was an iron bit that reached from
his mouth to his eyelashes,
was his chest pushed into a tree
that a whip had long long
ago stripped clean,

He is here & here & now,
there & there & now, and
he has seen and knows what
the Republic betroths to each
and every beloved boy, one orb,
one tassel, the right to move
freely, to get the hell up and go,
the trendsetting, newly minted,
streamlined, black face boy,
first ordained by their civil war,
empties his pockets, cinches up
his long illegal legs,
and again, like his father,
shrewdly,
starts to move,

the black face boy has reinvented walking.



"Black Boy with Flag," from the Robert L. Scott Collection of 19th and 20th Century African American Vernacular Photography



Now that it's finally getting cooler outside, it's time for us to leave the comfort of our air conditioners. We can take our bikes out and explore new places, or watch the leaves change in our backyard. For you, maybe Fall means camping and comfort food, or maybe it's touchdowns and tailgating—either way, we hope this special *Oxford American* advertising section will bring you everything you need to make the most of the season.



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PAT MUSICK & JERRY CARR
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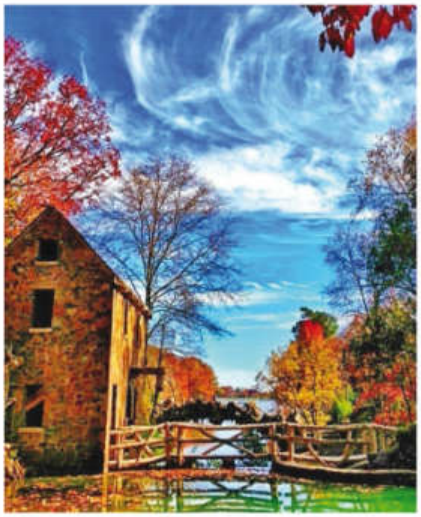
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GROTESK

by Evan James

Me trying to get from Iowa to Georgia, it wasn't pretty. I'd been invited to spend the fall living and writing in the childhood home of Carson McCullers, which was lucky, because I didn't really have a permanent home of my own just then: I'd been bouncing between artists' cities and artists' colonies, staying up all night drinking and talking with artists, and making art that no one would buy. I did have a gray 1989 Volvo with more than 300,000 miles on it—I can see it outside my window right now; a big tree branch fell on it last week, and left one side view mirror dangling by its wires—to which I already owed my miraculously safe passage from San Francisco to the Midwest. I took it to the shop for a last-minute checkup, crossed my fingers, and set out for the South.

This was late August. The Volvo's air conditioning no longer worked, so I spent most of the first day's drive with all the windows half-lowered, sweating as the grim stretch of Missouri that shoulders I-55 rolled by. Because the stereo in the Volvo no longer worked either, I'd picked up a boom box at a Goodwill before leaving, along with a copy of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* on tape. In order to hear the British actor Alexander Spencer read *Dracula* over the roar of air coming through my windows, I had to turn the volume up as loud as it would go. If you happened to be standing in front of a Shell station outside St. Louis that day, you may have seen a sweaty thirty-year-old from the West Coast on his way to a dead Southern novelist's house ("Now he looks queer," you might have thought, "Should we beat him up?"), pulling in to pump some gas while a British voice reading the words of a nineteenth-century Irish writer blasted from a car of Swedish make:

"THE PHANTOM SHAPES, WHICH WERE BECOMING GRADUALLY MATERIALISED FROM THE MOONBEAMS, WERE THOSE THREE GHOSTLY WOMEN TO WHOM I WAS DOOMED. . . ."

I spent that night in Memphis. I woke up early to get a cup of coffee downtown, and wound up in a shop full of police officers—eight or nine of them, all milling around with white paper cups in their hands. I approached the counter with some trepidation. "Don't make any trouble now," the barista called. "We've got the whole force in here!"

We laughed, and the whole force laughed with us. "This bodes well," I thought.

* * *

Columbus, where Carson McCullers spent her childhood, sits just east of the Chattahoochee River, which also serves as a geographical border between Georgia and Alabama. In the kitchen of the McCullers house, my boom box picked up an Alabama public radio station; after writing all day, and before reading all night, I would listen to the radio and cook, in the very room from which warm meals once emerged to feed the girl who grew up to write *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.* I still haven't read that book, though I meant to do so the whole time I was in Georgia. I had by then read *The Ballad of the Sad Café,* with its surprise wrestling-match betrayal at the hands of a formerly beloved dwarf, and *Reflections in a Golden Eye,* with its closeted army captain, hysterical army wives, and flaming Filipino houseboy. Protected first editions of these and other McCullers books sat in glass cabinets in the dining room. Promotional stills from film adaptations adorned the walls, such as one of a young Alan Arkin as the deaf-mute John Singer, deaf-mutely riding a carousel horse.

A letter came to the house shortly after I arrived, from the mayor of Columbus—Teresa Tomlinson, the city's first female mayor. The letter welcomed me to town, then warned me that the food in Georgia could be a little fattening. The mayor also included a clipping about me from the local paper, the *Ledger-Enquirer,* in which my name appeared correctly in the body of the text, but as "James Evans" in the headline. This put a smile on my face. I'd never been written about in a newspaper before, and somehow the mistake made me happier than I would've been if they'd gotten it right. "This, too, bodes well," I thought.

Writing aside, the primary gift of a residency is ample time half-free from the expectations of the world. The unexpected gift is that one may start, as a matter of course, to reciprocate the favor, relaxing one's expectations of the world in turn. A name misspelled in the newspaper, a surprise interruption by two aging road trippers curious to see where Carson lived, or a rejection from a prospective literary agent saying that the heightened energy of your novel was *somewhat overwhelming* all become occasions not for annoyance or despair, but amusement, curiosity, cheerful drinking.

This was the frame of mind I soon found myself in, anyway, while tinkering with, as promised in my application letter and phone interview, another novel draft. There are only so many hours in the day I can bear this "working with spider webs," as a novelist mentor once described the process to me; after that, I eat, clean, shop, talk. It was in carrying out these tasks that I tasted the magic elixir of life in Columbus. Almost every day I would walk to Publix, the closest supermarket. I'd discover along the way that many pedestrian sidewalks in town end without warning, which left me little choice but to walk in the road. In Publix, mothers would run into one another, and after a dance of decorous small talk, get down to gossiping in heavy Georgian accents:

"Oh, her? She goes to the doctor a lot. Always goin' to the chiropractor."

"Chiropractors! Now there's someone who'll always find somethin' wrong with you."

"And it's usually somethin' pretty creepy, if you ask me."

"It doesn't seem to be of much use, does it?"

"I sure doubt it. Though I did go once myself, when my head was misaligned."

I'd be standing there with a packet of bacon in hand, trying to commit this conversation to memory. By the time I thought I had it, some new and noteworthy thing would happen. In this case, while paying for my groceries, my eyes went wide when the cashier, a middle-aged white woman, said to the tall, graying, light-skinned black man in overalls in line behind me, "Good afternoon, Mr. President."

"You don't know how often I get that," said the man.

"Doesn't he look like the president?" the cashier said to me.

The man who she thought looked like the president was grinning my way. He didn't *not* look like the president, but the extent to which his face resembled that of Barack

Previous Page: "Hammershøi," from the series *Reading Robert Wilson*. Photograph by Mary Ellen Bartley. Courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery

Obama's was debatable enough to make the situation feel fraught. I was just about to respond with what I thought would be the best possible rejoinder—"Which one?"—when the dark-skinned young man putting my groceries into plastic bags said to me, "Look like *who*?"

"The president," I said.

The young man laughed and shook his head, retreating back into the world of his well-protected private thoughts. Then the cashier held up a bottle of purple Vitamin Water I was buying. "Do you want this now?" she said. "Or are you going to drink it later, so that you can pour it over ice?"

And so I would walk back to Carson McCullers's childhood home, a translucent green grocery bag hanging from each hand, mentally repeating to myself, "Misaligned head, Mr. President, Vitamin Water over ice . . . misaligned head, Mr. President, Vitamin Water over ice . . ." until I could sit down with my diary, and a glass of iced Vitamin Water, and record these details. Then Clarinet Corner would come on—a weekly public radio broadcast during which a man from Alabama and a visiting musician from Kraków, Poland, would talk excitedly about woodwinds—and I'd think, "But I just finished writing down everything that happened to me *outside* the house." My keenest despair then was that some dazzling facet of daily life such as this would slip from the grasp of my memory, and that life would fast outpace the speed at which I could make happy note of it.

* * *

It's harder to keep your thoughts in a philosophically amused, curious frame of mind when something actually unpleasant happens. As a preventive measure against the insane thinking that can come of too much artistic solitude and isolation, I started jogging around the track at Columbus High School in the mornings. What began as a habit driven by commendable sanity soon became one marked by derailing infatuation—what else is new?—when I found that my jogs overlapped with those of a woman and her extremely handsome personal trainer. Judging from his disinterest in my sideward glances at him and his revealing spandex, he was probably straight as could be. If I had been a closeted Army captain like Penderton in *Reflections in a Golden Eye,* I might have murdered him out of frustration when he snuck over to my house to sleep with my wife instead of me. Still, my desire to show this unavailable hunk how fit and well-adjusted I could be by running around the track and doing push-ups and lunges led me to overexert myself, and one evening, back at Carson McCullers's childhood home, I threw my back out.

I lay on the carpeted floor of the basement apartment, looking at the desk where I wrote every day. I cursed it for having put me in the humiliating position of being so unfit for exercise that I could cripple myself with my own body weight. "So much for life with the personal trainer," I thought, "though now I could use his expertise more than ever."

Pain has a way of compounding any already present sense of being miserably alone in the world. Now I felt more like a character in a McCullers story every day—a lonely gay crushed between the magic of desire and the hell of unrequited lust, a living, breathing part of the so-called Southern Gothic, with its so-called grotesques. (The idea of the grotesque has its roots in High Renaissance Rome. Raphael, interested in ancient Roman ruins, had himself lowered by rope into the "grottoes" beneath the Trajan Baths—rooms, actually, that had been part of the domestic wing in Nero's Golden House. The rooms were painted in a Pompeian style in which, according to the historian Daniel Boorstin, "fantastic forms of people and animals were intermingled with flowers, garlands, and arabesques into a symmetrical design." Raphael imitated this style, which was called *grottesche*—"in the style of the grottoes"—when he painted the Vatican loggias. Boorstin continues: "'Grotesk,' William Aglionby's English treatise on painting explained in 1686, 'is properly the Painting that is found under the Ground in the Ruines of Rome.'")

Rehabilitation came slow, aided by lame walks around the neighborhood. Passing one house, I recalled a neighbor with a good sense of humor who had come to the reception held for me at the house a few weeks before. He told me he had accidentally seen one of the previous writers-in-residence walking around the house in her underwear while he was smoking a cigar on his deck. "Hope you don't make a habit of walking around in a similar state!" he joked. "Or is that just something all writers *do*?" I wanted to say that it kind of was. Then he told me I should get an air horn, so that if the house was ever being burglarized, I could sound it, and he would come over with his shotgun.

During these rehab walks I saw many lawns with one or more ROMNEY/RYAN signs staked into them. The election was coming up. I didn't want Mitt Romney to become president, not at all. I wanted the person who came to mind every time the cashier at Publix laid eyes on an older black man with greying hair to run our country. But I'd heard on the radio, from a voter demographic expert weighing in on the debates, that the most influential factors driving American voting habits remained race, religion, and marital status. So I was nervous, having read several frenzied public accusations that the Right had put campaign energy into discouraging people of color from voting in strategic places. Confused and discouraged voters during the presidential election seemed to be a pleasing prospect for some people. It was harder to be amused by the world at election time; I often turned off the TV in Carson McCullers's childhood home, disgusted, in the middle of a debate or news of haywire voting machines, or a grotesque campaign pseudo-event.

But I still had the cookbook. I'd used my Chattahoochee Valley Libraries card—which I obtained by proudly showing my letter from the mayor to a librarian—to check out several books on Southern cooking. If I couldn't lay hands on the hot personal trainer or bring myself to read *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter,* I could at least leave Georgia having tried to learn how to cook a proper pot of greens. This I intended to do by consulting cookbooks, consulting Southerners, and making a total mess of the kitchen in Carson McCullers's childhood home. Soon, however, I discovered that the library's copy of *Craig Claiborne's Southern Cooking* held something even better than recipes: another library patron, I assume a Southerner who felt very strongly about the ins and outs of their cuisine, had gone through the book and made many alterations, marginal arguments, and irate sentence-level edits. In one paragraph, for example, the phantom editor had crossed out "roux are" and written an emphatically underlined *is*. In the margin they'd written:

gravy is
roux is
grits is
SINGULAR
oatmeal is
porridge is
rice is

At the end of the paragraph, a penciled-in asterisk decorated the end of a line reading, "One of the most important ingredients in the preparation of a roux is self-confidence." The asterisk led to a scrawled footnote: the words *patience* and *practice* stacked one on top of the other. In the recipe for Goldsboro Potato Salad, the editor had violently crossed out the brand name in a note about most of the barbecue restaurants in North Carolina using Hellmann's mayonnaise.

"*NO!*" read the correction. "*Duke's!*"

After I'd finished laughing, I shook my head. Now I was going to have to record this in my diary as well. And I'd have to do it while moving between my desk and the floor, depending on which one had become less painful for my back at any given moment. On the floor I might think, "The great Southern novelist Carson McCullers once walked over this floor."

* * *

One of the guys from the English department at Columbus State gave me a painkiller on election night. My back was improving, but I took it anyway—there was so much more than just back pain to kill. A small group of Democrats from the university had gathered for what we imagined would be a long and bitter night of voter returns plagued by recounts. Then the results came in swiftly, with minimal drama. Good afternoon, Mr. President.

A couple of weeks later, the director of the McCullers Center held a delightful Thanksgiving dinner at her home. She surprised me by saying that her greens recipe used olive oil instead of ham hocks, smoked turkey legs, or some other meat product. I'd been cooking them with ham hocks, a joint of meat that had never crossed the threshold to my own childhood home, where the freezer regularly overflowed with salmon caught by my grandmother and her husband. I imagined the vigilante cookbook editor interjecting:

~~olive oil~~ *NO! Pig!*

After the toast, we started in on stuffing, turkey, candied yams, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans. One of the creative writing professors, who had sold me on *HHhH,* a French novel about the assassination of a Nazi leader, told me that two men in a neighboring county had been accused of trying to burn a predominantly black church on the night of Obama's reelection. Immediately, in other words. Had they been standing by with oil-soaked rags and Bic lighters, watching the returns? Looking around the Thanksgiving table at our gathered group of humanities academics, poets, and emerging writers, I wondered what we would have been moved to burn if Romney had won. A golf course? Piles of the Book of Mormon? No, we wouldn't have burned anything—we would have retreated to our separate corners with our copies of *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and maybe a nice glass of Riesling, or gone onto our preferred news websites and read postmortem commentary about the election.

Later I read in the *Ledger-Enquirer* that the men, thirty-seven and nineteen, burned the Christian flag and an old Bible inside the sanctuary, and tried to ignite pews and a communion table. The paper got their names right, and reported that their original bonds were set at around $137,000.

* * *

Nearly three months had passed. My time in Georgia was coming to an end. My back had benefited from an intense sports massage at the hands of a burly, ex-military lesbian who operated out of an otherwise abandoned-looking building in one of the complexes in Columbus's commercial sprawl. Political signage had been pulled up from lawns, discarded along sidewalks, or left exactly where it was, signaling unbroken pride, fresh reproach, or lax housekeeping. My senses of wonder and curiosity revived now that, post-election, I expected and wanted less from the world. I would miss Carson McCullers's childhood home, where I had done a great deal of writing, and pulled things up from the grottoes of my mind in solitude, and read many books, though not *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.*

Before I left, I met with a handful of students from the university in the conference room at the house. They ran a creative writing club, and wanted to have a Q&A session with me. They'd advertised the event as "Talking With Evan James," which I liked, as it sounded like an intervention, or like they planned on disciplining or dumping me. ("We need to talk.") The students, full of a love of literature, full of questions about books, grad school, how to make characters in fiction, and also how to make money, delighted me.

I did my best. I tried to drive home the importance of every individual honoring his or her own curiosities, and taking that which attracted his or her interest seriously. "We should be like Raphael, lowering himself on ropes down into the 'grottoes' beneath the Trajan Baths," I would say, were it today. I tried to help them understand that writing might even be worth it, because at its best it rewarded curiosity richly, never mind what it was like at its worst, and to persuade them to drink from the elixir of life. (I didn't actually say "the elixir of life." I would have turned beet red, and proceeded to stammer incoherently, if the words had crossed my lips. I tried to *suggest* they drink from the elixir of life without saying so.)

One student asked me if I felt extra pressure living in Carson McCullers's childhood home—pressure to perform under the spectral watch of a Great Writer. I thought for a moment, then said, "No, not at all." I felt the pressure of being alive, the pressure to make something of my own daily America, which was filled to the brim with burning churches, thrown backs, broken Volvos, personal trainers, misaligned heads, sublimated erotic desires, salmon, Scandinavian crime fiction, students asking me whether I felt the pressure—do you feel the pressure? I felt like I might fail, but that if I did—and whether failure or success suited me better—would have little to do with Carson McCullers hanging over me like some phantom editor, pencil in hand, over *Craig Claiborne's Southern Cooking.* If Carson McCullers wanted to put any pressure on me from beyond the grave, I doubt it would be critical pressure meant to shape my prose in the image of her own, or to compare my life trajectory with hers and find it wanting. ("I'd written three books by your age!") No. I might find her quarters, painted as they are with fantastic forms, garlands, and arabesques, haunting in another way, true; she might, through them, press an asterisk into my mind as I observed and took happy note. The asterisk would lead to a footnote: the word "patience," the word "practice," one and the other, bodies fitted together, lovers kept alive on underground walls.


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On a recent trip to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Claudia Delfin visits the city's main cathedral, as she does each time she crosses the border.



Crossing Over

By Jonathan Blitzer

Born in El Paso,
She Made Herself in Juárez

Photographs by Reed Young



En route last year from El Paso to Ciudad Juárez, once the most dangerous city on earth, Claudia Delfin crossed the border in fear over what she'd find on the other side, but the real trouble was in coming back. After spending a few jittery hours in Mexico, she waited among the throng at customs on the Santa Fe Street Bridge while her Juárez nerves slowly stopped jangling. A uniformed officer called her over to his booth, barely making eye contact. He cut an authoritarian bust behind his desk, just upper torso visible on a boosted chair. She held out her Texas state ID and a tattered birth certificate. Both documents said Ricardo, not Claudia—and the ID, when plugged into the computer, called up a long list of prison stints. Claudia is thin and gangly, five feet seven inches, with dark skin, a broad nose, and deep-set brown eyes. Her smile is a few teeth shy of being pristine—metal caps top her canines, and flash when she talks. Two tattoos in a loopy scrawl spill over the tops of her hands, and another spiders around the nape of her neck.

The questions followed, one after the other, the pace quickening. *Where do you work? Do you have drugs? Who were you there to see?* There was too much story to get through, and Claudia's voice snagged and wavered, her answers spilling out in a jumble. She's transgender, and never changed the name on her ID; the priors were for old offenses (drugs, prostitution, theft); she was visiting friends, and has a godson on the other side. The officer stepped down from his perch and led her into a side room with white cinder-block walls; jack-booted patrolmen clomped in and out. She stood by while they figured out what to do with her. Eventually, they propped Claudia against a wall and two teams, working in pairs, set in on her. The female officers went first, patting her down from the waist up with gloved hands, latex against the skin. They toyed with her bra, tilting it to see if drugs fell out. Then the men took over. They felt from the waist down, holding firm hands to her inner thighs and grazing against her penis for contraband. After fifteen minutes, they returned an uneaten burrito she'd been carrying in her purse, and she was free to go.

It was the first time Claudia had gone to Juárez in more than a decade. She was forty-five, and began crossing into the city in her teens. El Paso and Juárez are sibling cities, joined together in a single metropolitan hub, with families, businesses, and communities enmeshed across both sides. Claudia's trips used to be routine, practically second nature, but she stopped going around 2000, when the killings picked up. Women had been disappearing in Juárez throughout the Nineties in an epidemic of rapes and murders. Most of the victims belonged to a swelling urban underclass; they were low-wage laborers picked off on their way home from work on secluded patches of desert road. NAFTA had been pushing Mexico's poorest citizens up from the interior and into the factories along the northern corridor, where they converged





In 2005, Claudia checked into a clinic for recovering addicts at an agency called Aliviane, in El Paso. Six years later, she was working there, distributing condoms; conducting HIV tests; providing counseling; and caring for addicts on the same streets where she used to score. This summer, she won a prestigious statewide award for her work in fighting AIDS in the community.

on a turf war fought by the cartels. Drug violence took Claudia's two cities, gutted one and sealed up the other. In 2010, there were more than three thousand murders in Juárez alone, while in El Paso there were all of five. The gore and terror sharpened the dividing line itself. To come home to El Paso from the south raised more questions than could easily be answered, and so for twenty minutes Claudia was marooned on a bridge, in *fronteriza* limbo.

* * *

At the time, Claudia lived a few blocks away, in a squat baby-blue house on Estrella Street nestled right up against the border. "I'm comfortable here. I feel safe, and everyone knows me," she told me when we first met, in August 2013. We'd been walking the streets together one evening, past single-story houses of yellow and pink and turquoise, with fenced-in yards fringed with hanging laundry and prowled by a motley chorus of yapping dogs. An elderly couple greeted her warmly in Spanish from across the block, slipping into calling her Ricky, from when they knew her as a boy. Cars streamed down a wide thoroughfare to the south and onto the border highway ringing the city. A giant red sculpture in the shape of a chunky X loomed on the Juárez side, casting the eerie spell of a memento mori. Nearer by, though still in Juárez, was a sign in austere black letters, facing El Paso and imploring, in English, NO MORE WEAPONS. The whirl of activity and menace to the south—the whoosh of semis, the blare of horns—had an almost tranquilizing effect on Claudia's neighborhood, which is firmly tucked away between the two worlds, as though forgotten to both.

Claudia has spent her life shuttling between El Paso and Juárez—for a time, under the thick fog of drugs and addiction, as a sex worker and minor gangster. She's been clean for eight years and now works as a drug counselor for a local nonprofit, hauling addicts out of the same slums where she used to score and delivering them back to life, if they'll let her. Almost all of her old friends are dead, from AIDS, overdoses, or homicides. That summer, Claudia told me how lucky she felt, that it

was a wonder she was even still alive. "I'm a blessing," she said, aiming for "blessed" but skipping past it, which is how she talks, her speech full of plucky miscues.

As we sat over coffee that day, she began to tell me the story of her life. We had met unexpectedly, while I was in El Paso researching another story about unincorporated towns popping up across the borderlands of Texas. My original plan was to start in El Paso and range a few hundred miles to the west and east, and on the eve of my trip I started mapping out an itinerary. In the midst of my reading, I glimpsed a photo of Claudia in a local spread about lives along the border. There wasn't much by way of description, only a cryptic caption about how Claudia used to travel to Juárez dressed as a man. Was this a kind of cover—and, if so, was it to ease her entry into Mexico, or else to protect her on her return to Texas? It wasn't immediately clear on which side of the border this story even began, so I got in touch with the photographer, who gave me Claudia's number. I called to introduce myself, and she was warm but firm on the phone. When she gave me her address, it was to a house a couple of doors down from her own. It was just after dusk when I got there, and the sidewalk was dimly lit by a distant streetlamp. I stood, hunched and uneasy, before a house with darkened windows and a gate forbidding entry. Then, I heard my name and wheeled around; she'd materialized from the shadows, walking toward me in heels, with a wobbly gait. She greeted me in a loud voice that rang out on the empty street, and we drove toward the pulsating brightness of a nearby strip mall, where the first of our many conversations began.

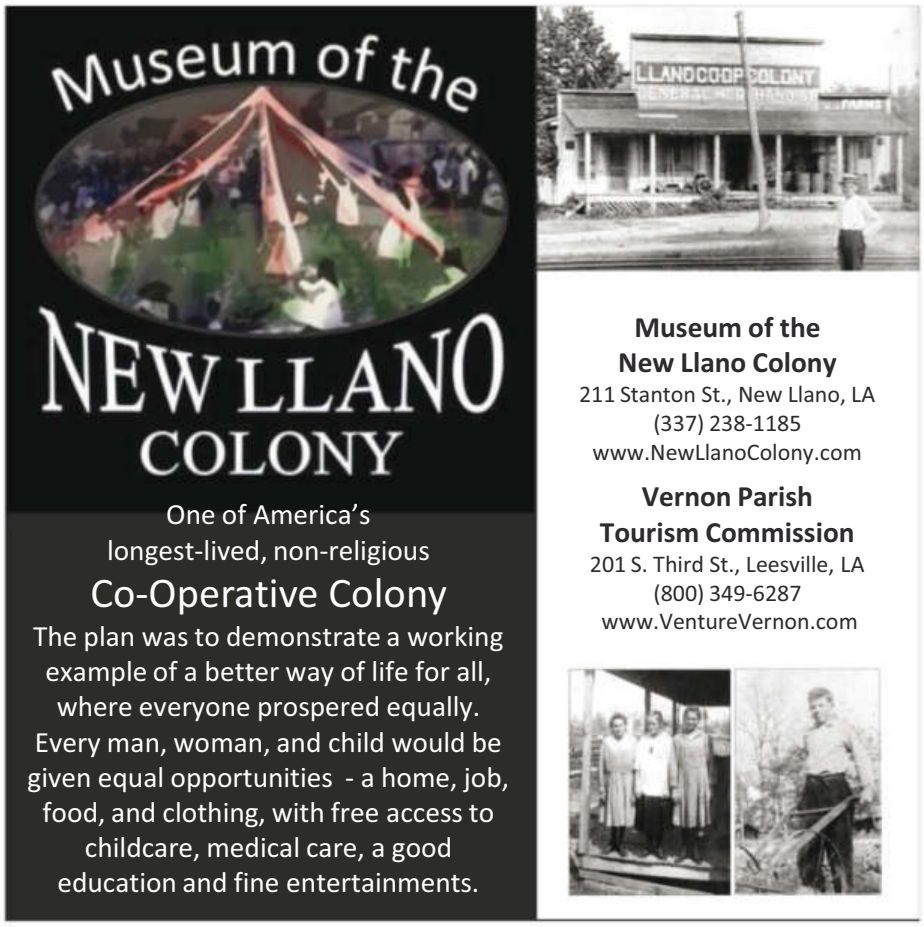
Claudia gets her hormones from Juárez, where they're cheaper and can be bought without insurance. When the violence kept her away, she paid people to retrieve them for her, until they stopped going themselves. For a while, Claudia was taking her hormones only about three times a year. When we met, her doses were more consistent than that, but still irregular; she'd miss months at a time, and it showed. Her frame was ropy and withered, her face lightly creased and stubbly around the chin. Her voice rattled like something about to break. She said it was "agony" having to live like this. "How should I say it? In the morning, you wake up not like a lady. This is how you wake up every day, right? How all the guys do," she said, then laughed a pealing, shrieking laugh. It took me a few seconds to catch her meaning: without her hormones, an old familiar feeling kept creeping back between her legs.

Later that year, the killings seemed to ebb in Juárez, shifting to a beleaguered hamlet east of the city called the Valley. There was a reprieve of sorts, or what passed for one in Juárez. People were starting to say *está calmado,* though still with downcast eyes. The bloodletting was either settling down or else tamping into normalcy. I called Claudia one day late last summer, from New York, to see how she was, and a chirpy, ebullient voice answered. It was higher-pitched than I remembered it. Claudia had just come back from Juárez; she had decided to make the trips again. They were simple jaunts: to visit friends, take a turn around town, then head home. But the city electrified her and made her whole. Living without it had made El Paso, her own native soil, feel like exile.

* * *

I'd left El Paso in 2013 without experiencing Claudia's life on the other side of the border. We didn't know each other well then, having only a week-long acquaintanceship to go on, but our eagerness for news from Juárez yoked us together. For the next year and a half, I scoured the Juárez papers weekly to follow the latest patterns of violence. Claudia watched the local broadcast each morning before work, and prodded her friends for scraps of information. Finally, last December, I flew back to spend two weeks with her around Christmastime, touching down in El Paso late one Monday night. The next day, we headed to Mexico.

When Claudia crosses, she dresses for the trip. I picked her up in a shiny rental car, and she came out to meet me clad in denim and a baseball hat, with a pair of Converse All Stars and no makeup at all. Her one concession to style was a multi-colored scarf she'd wrapped around her neck, which I took as a sign of mischief, if also protection; her goal, when crossing, is to cover up. She bounced her knees excitedly in the front seat, and talked to me like a schoolteacher. "So we're not gonna use our cell phones, right?" Her sentences end in open, spondee sounds with a whiny kick of Mexican



Spanish doused on top. "We're gonna talk only in Spanish, okay, sir?" Whenever she gets serious or solicitous she reverts to little tics of formality. The night before, over a waffle dinner at a diner off the interstate, we had run through some of these minor precautions, and she told me how it used to be.

When she was sixteen, Claudia would sneak out to the underage clubs in Juárez, called *tardeadas*; that's where she first transitioned. She'd head south as Ricardo, change into heels and makeup in a barroom bathroom, and become Claudia, a name she'd chosen after a girl she went to school with. "I would change like a boy, and I had my girl stuff right here," she said, pointing to a drawstring backpack. Eventually, she would change back and return to El Paso so her family wouldn't be the wiser. "I wouldn't come back as a girl. *Callate,* no! I would have my wig and my foam"—to round out her chest and butt—"the Eighties were all wigs and foam and lashes, you know, the whole works."

In those days, it was illegal to crossdress in public on the streets of Juárez, and corrupt cops would wait outside the bars and clubs downtown to round up the trans partiers en masse. The officers would rob and beat them, throw them in jail, and, in a particular torment, almost always shave their heads. All the Mexican women wore wigs as a result, the gaudier the better. These were dark times, Claudia told me. If the cops didn't get you, it'd be the *cholos*—local gangsters—who gave chase just for the sport of it. Claudia remembers those as the running years—fleeing from the cops, from the *cholos,* hiding out, wheezing and winded all the time. "What I remember most from then is fear," she said. "A lot of my friends got killed in Juárez. They chopped their breasts off, choked them, drowned them in the river. They would wait for them across the river, just to get one and drown her." All through the Eighties and Nineties, Claudia would go to parties or bars and rehearse the same macabre litany. "Oh, so and so got pushed out of the car. Oh, so and so got stabbed. Oh, so and so got shot. Oh, so and so, they found her buried there under that abandoned house. A lot of them got killed bad."

On the morning of our crossing, her neighborhood was shorn of its usual street-corner loiterers, but it still hummed with activity, as people hurried around to escape the cold. We drove downtown, where I parked the car in a lot next to a toll station, and we set out, on foot, at a brisk pace. Four roads lead from El Paso straight into Juárez; Claudia's preference is the Santa Fe Street Bridge because of where it lets her out, on Avenida Juárez, a bustling strip of shops and bars downtown. The avenue delivers her, with only a few intervening streets, to the bus stop where she picks up the Linea Central to visit her friends, in a rundown neighborhood farther west.

The bridge is wide and paved, with four lanes for cars and a walkway on each side lined with cross-barred railings and topped by a metal canopy. Below us was the dried-up riverbed of the Rio Grande, its banks refashioned into a sloping, concrete channel riddled with bilingual graffiti. Claudia wended her way past the other crossers—an elderly woman pushing carts full of groceries, a drunk in a cowboy hat staggering from side to side with a bottle tipping out of his back pocket. "Qué bonito!" she kept saying, at all the bustle. It was the incipient rumble of Juárez. Car traffic heading north was at a standstill and street peddlers wove among the vehicles while beggars lay rumpled—heads down, cups out—along the roadway.

"I used to cross with the girls, illegally, through the river," Claudia said. "It's hard to imagine now, because the river is dry, but it was up to here!" She drew an imaginary line across her chest. "I would cross with them, just not to cross myself, just for the excitement. I'm the type of person who wanted to be there. We would cross and hide from immigration."

The entry into Mexico is unceremonious—a step down a small ramp under the gaze of an indifferent cop, and straight into an immediate crush of pedestrians. The street was potholed and under heavy construction. Rubble-strewn lots alternated with crumbling storefronts and abandoned bars, and exposed sockets and electrical cords unspooling in cobra coils spilled out of uncapped fuse boxes on the sidewalk. Norteño anthems, heavy on accordion, rang out from store radios, while vendors hawked corn on the cob, tonging it out of steaming vats on wheels. We passed Farmacia Benavides, where Claudia gets her hormones, and she popped in to ask if her doctor was there to say hi. He wasn't, and we walked on, stopping so that Claudia could fish out change for a woman who was sitting on the curb with a





In 2013, Claudia became a godmother to Alan García, the son of two of her friends in Juárez. She sees Alan and his parents often, at their house in a neighborhood called Alta Vista. She had stopped visiting the city for years during the drug war, and only recently began crossing again. "It brings me happiness being back here, happiness that I'm not the person that I used to be," she said.

cardboard box full of packets of gum for sale. "God bless you," she said to us, warmly but vacantly. Claudia said goodbye to her with a friendly familiarity, like they'd just exchanged confidences and would speak again soon.

Rounding the bend on Avenida 16 de Septiembre, Claudia turned to me as she caught sight of the cathedral at the end of the block. "Ya no sufro como antes," she said; ever since she's returned, she hasn't suffered like before. Policemen milled around with strapped-on AKs resting atop their paunches, which were heftily bulked—part flak jacket, part protruding gut. The sight of them startled her, and Claudia avoided their eyes as they passed. Still, she doesn't fear them as she once did. ("They just go after the druggies now," she explained.) Occasionally, I heard the hisses of teenagers on the street as they caught sight of Claudia and pointed her out to each other, and a few older guys ogled. "It's better now," she said. "In the Eighties, all us transgender, we had to hide a lot. In the Nineties, it wasn't as bad, but people were mean, trying to touch you and stuff. I had to fight. It doesn't bother me anymore, they're just uneducated." She chalked this up not to Juárez, but to the conservatism of the country's interior. "A lot of people come here from all over Mexico, and they're not as open," she said. "The Juarenses are more used to this, they've seen more 'cause this is a border town." She was always coming to the city's defense.

We took the long way around the cathedral, to savor the approach, and we skirted a leafy courtyard by way of a colonnaded street called



Noche Triste. She was leading me to the mall, a place of no less spiritual import. "Me hago todo aquí," she said. "I make myself here in Juárez." She didn't just mean the hormones, but her nails, hair, and makeup, too. She visited her *estilistas* in a nook between shops, and she waved into a nail salon, receiving a warm gust of greetings in return. As we elbowed through the crowds, Claudia would point to some passerby and say, "That guy, he's a client of mine from rehab. Heroin." I'd look and see a glassy-eyed loafer walking with a slump. This is a habit of hers on both sides of the border: spotting people on the street and identifying them by their addictions. Most of the time, if they saw her, they called out in recognition, or nodded faintly, but sometimes she'd eye someone and say to me, practically under her breath, "weed," and the scheme suddenly felt like a put-on. Heroin and crack announce themselves in the eyes, or in speckles on the arms, but what could betray pot in someone's step? Claudia trotted out these observations not so much for my benefit as for hers, as a mode of reassurance. Everyone on the street had a story, and she knew it.

We'd wandered east, over by a little park called Plaza de Misión de Guadalupe. Old repainted school buses, conscripted into public transport, hurtled past, kicking up dirt and dust along nubby curbs. Suddenly, someone shouted Claudia's name. We turned around to face the sound together. Standing there were two women holding hands, one in a puffy coat, sunglasses, and a baseball cap; the other in spandex, with bloodshot eyes, her hair permed but mussed. They swayed a little, dipping out into the street.

"Claudia, hey. You good? Listen, she's infected," she said, in English, raising her arm slightly to indicate the other woman. "We just found out. What should I do?" Claudia offered her condolences in Spanish, but the woman cautioned her back into English. "I don't want people to understand what we're saying," she said. I stepped away to give them privacy, and after a few minutes, Claudia hugged the woman and came over to me, rerouting us to the bus.

"She's a heroin addict, from El Paso, one of my clients. Her girlfriend is from here. She's HIV positive. They were asking me about sex toys, if they could still use them, so I told them how to clean them. Even like this," she said, indicating the hat pulled low over her eyes, "they recognized me." She was proud to be known, but also wary of being so easily spotted.

* * *

We decided to head straight to her friends' house in the barrio of Altavista, so we made our way to an unmarked strip of dirt road a few blocks over from Avenida 16 de Septiembre to catch a bus. Soon we were spiraling up a hill of unpaved streets, past chop shops, hardware stores, a criminal law practice, a kempt little police station. Claudia met Gerardo and Sofia a year and a half ago. Claudia's landlord in El Paso was married to Gerardo's ailing father, and because Gerardo couldn't afford the papers to cross for visits, he relied on her for updates. "We started talking over Facebook, then the phone," she told me on the way. Her friendship with the couple almost had the feel of a budding romance: the calls, the messages, the gradually knowing-more. When Sofia gave birth to a son, Alan, in 2013, they named Claudia his godmother, and soon after she began visiting Juárez again.

"I was looking to go over there. I wanted to help them out, to babysit. Sometimes I helped them with their marriage when they had fights. But yeah, I also needed my hormones," she said, admitting that the counseling and babysitting gave her a convenient new pretense for trips into Juárez. It was the occasion she'd been looking for to start over: where once she went to party, now she was going to cook dinner with friends and look after their kid. "It brings me happiness being back here, happiness that I'm not the person that I used to be," she said. Claudia drifted into English in the telling, and I could feel the creeping curiosity of the other bus passengers, who darted their eyes and only turned their heads on the sly.

Altavista is perched on the city's northwestern edge, an old add-on to another neighborhood on the backside of downtown called Bellavista. Juárez grows out haphazardly, with *colonia* stacked upon *colonia* in an indiscernible centrifugal design. Already there are other neighborhoods—poorer, more remote—extending out farther west, pressed up against the El Paso border but in a kind of inverted mirror image. The farther west you go in Juárez the more abject the landscape becomes. The western rim of downtown El Paso is affluent, with great big houses gazing out over Anapra, a Mexican slum town.

Claudia shouted to the driver to let us off, and we hopped down as the bus slowed without stopping. We walked onto a side street studded with ramshackle houses, and approached one with a door of grated metal, secured on its hinges by fraying wire. Sofia greeted us, with Alan in her arms. She is thickset and short, with shoulder-length dark hair and a round face. She hugged Claudia and shook my hand before waving us in. We walked through an anteroom with brick walls covered in white and yellow chipped paint. The floor

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was busted up, dirt spilling through the cracks; stone fragments from the walls were heaped into piles. Over the windows were burlap bags cut to rough proportions so they could double as shades, and the sunlight filtered in, patchy and mottled. Claudia took out a box of long stick matches from her backpack and handed them to Sofia for the shower—the couple heats up pails of water and bathes over a grate in the bathroom. The living room has a couch on one side and an old RCA television on the other, an exposed light fixture dangling off a half-broken ceiling panel overhead. (Gerardo rerouted power from a streetlamp to light the house.) Above a dresser topped with lace doilies was a Dallas Cowboys football helmet, and the words "Juan 8:32" scrawled on the wall in marker. Two small bedrooms and a kitchen branched off at the end of the hallway.

Gerardo was at work, on the day shift at a factory called Automotive Lighting. By the time he'd get home, Sofia would be leaving for her own shift, at another factory, where she works from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M. for roughly 950 pesos a week. It was lunchtime, and we decided to eat at a taqueria up the road, the three of us walking shoulder-to-shoulder while Sofia pushed Alan in a stroller stuffed with blankets. White buses with the words TRANSPORTE DE PERSONAL stamped across their flanks ferried residents from Altavista to their factory shifts on the southeastern side of Juárez. One Juarense schoolteacher I spoke with called Altavista "the dormitory of the city"; people slept and ate here, but spent much of their waking lives at the factories, or en route to them. During the worst of the drug years, around 2010 or so, Altavista was known for giving cover to *malandros* and *delincuentes,* criminal elements; its proximity to downtown Juárez made it a natural hotbed of smuggling and drug dealing.

Sofia and Claudia ordered shrimp cocktails served in tall glasses with long ice-cream spoons, and Sofia poked at hers while Claudia took Alan and whirled him around. "Two years ago I had an accident," Sofia said shyly, in a soft voice accented by Campeche, her hometown in the south. She'd been driving in Juárez and was broadsided by a police van. Her car was totaled, and she was badly hurt, but the cops just drove off and left her there. In 2008, the President of Mexico had called in federal troops and police to quell the drug violence in Juárez because the cartels had overwhelmed the municipal cops. For a time this made the city even more dangerous, as law enforcement operated with impunity. "I couldn't walk for a month. I started to panic. Gerardo, who I knew from work, was the only person who helped me. I didn't have family here. There wasn't anyone to get me food."

We paid and left to walk Sofia and Alan home, back down the dirt hill, more white buses rattling past. A black Dodge Ram snaked out of an alleyway, and Claudia instantly stiffened. "What a nice-looking truck," she said, but there was a note of unease in her voice and her eyes zeroed in on the vehicle until it had passed from view. Claudia is on the lookout for signs such as these, like snags in the matrix. She told me to avoid guys with nice cowboy boots or fancy cell phones. One summer afternoon, more than a decade ago, she had been sitting with some friends in Juárez, eating lunch in an alleyway restaurant downtown, when two men with spiffy shoes walked in and pumped three bullets into a diner sitting next to them. "We hid under the table, and people screamed. The police came quick, almost too quick." She assumed the cops had been in on it.

* * *

Claudia grew up in a part of El Paso called the Chamizal, a swath of land that the U.S. and Mexico argued over until the mid-1960s—about as borderline a stretch of border as you can find in an American city. By the terms of an 1848 treaty, the boundary between the two countries was the Rio Grande, which bent and corkscrewed all the way through West Texas. By the mid-1860s, massive floods had begun shifting its banks south by more than a mile, and left about 600 square acres that once fell plainly on the Mexican side freshly up for grabs. It didn't take long for Americans to claim them. By the early 1900s, hundreds of complaints by Mexican landholders had already accrued.

The squabble turned on an alluvial question with an almost philosophical bent: had the river gradually shifted course, or was its change sudden and precipitous? The Americans claimed the former, the Mexicans, the latter. International arbiters intervened, and ruled largely in Mexico's favor, but the Americans ignored the findings. Mexicans complained about "Yankee imperialism" to the north, and the Americans retorted with gripes about "communist agitators" to the south. Meanwhile, five thousand residents

made homes on the American side, ranging from a tenement district called Segundo Barrio in downtown El Paso all the way to the city's eastern fringes. According to Nestor Valencia, El Paso's city planner during the 1960s, "portions of the Chamizal may be the only neighborhoods in the U.S. that were built on foreign soil."

It took the Cuban Missile Crisis to resolve the dispute. A sobered John F. Kennedy, looking for regional allies in the battle against communism, decided to mend fences with the Mexican president, and traveled to Mexico City in 1962. They agreed to resolve the land dispute once and for all, and two years later Lyndon Johnson inked the Chamizal Treaty. The bigger chunk of the area went back to Mexico, and about 200 acres became American.

Though Claudia wasn't born until four years after the treaty was signed, three landmarks of her world came out of it: the border highway forming the lower lip of her neighborhood; an adjacent park dubbed the Chamizal National Memorial; and Bowie High School, where Claudia spent her freshman year. A few days after our first trip together into Juárez, we walked around her neighborhood in El Paso. Ambling through the streets was like watching her past sidle back up to her. At one point, Claudia showed me an apothecary with a foreclosure sign nailed onto its front door and teal blue tile-work on its stoop. It was where her great-grandmother used to shop for household necessities, and where Claudia, decades later, bought her syringes.

Her neighborhood doesn't have a formal name so much as a general description—"the area downtown, by the Cordova bridge," is what people say—but it is sometimes known by a double-moniker that no longer applies, either "the Lugas" or "the DBT," which stands for "de barrio territory." These were the names used by gangs that controlled the neighborhood through the 1990s, making it a scrappy and dangerous place. "They used to run and gun all over here," Claudia told me. Those gangs are gone now, and the neighborhood is poor but streaked with life—some old storefronts are in disrepair, gated off to keep children away, as if on quarantine, but you won't find any trash on the streets. Two thoroughfares frame the barrio. On the north side runs Alameda Avenue, lined with mom-and-pop groceries, dollar stores, and bars; on the south is a roadway called Paisano, which gives onto the Chamizal. Claudia used to hook on these streets, prowling up and down Alameda, flagging down cars. We veered off into an alleyway between blocks, passing a dust-swept lot with scattered tufts of vegetation and a lone palm tree at one end, and we spotted a friend of Claudia's driving home from work. "I love the alleys," Claudia said. "I used to walk through here every day to go to elementary school. But these were also my escape routes later on. You know, maybe I stole drugs and needed to hide out and get home. In the night, I don't get scared of being alone here."

For almost all her life, she has lived within a four-block radius of the house she grew up in, a beige adobe structure on Findley Avenue where her grandmother, great-aunt, and father were also raised. Her keys clinked in her hands while she gestured toward it. It's at the end of the block, with an unobstructed view of Mexico. Trucks rode past us on the highway toward Juárez. "Border Patrol used to be here on horse," she said, waving her hand south. Across the street is the National Memorial, a grassy expanse criss-crossed with running paths and encircled by a dried-up dirt and gravel gully, the old path of the river. The Chamizal was always one of the more porous stretches of the border precisely because, historically, the dividing line was so hazy. During Prohibition, when the territory was still disputed, El Pasoans got their booze from a bar called Hole in the Wall, on an outcropping of Mexican land encircled by American plots. When Claudia was a child, she and her family barely recognized a boundary at all. "In those years, you used to climb under a rinky-dink fence into Mexico to get flour to cook with," she said.

Her mother, Eloisa, died when Claudia was four, of a cerebral hemorrhage. Her father, Ricardo, for whom she was named, was in and out of prison for drug dealing. Claudia's family consisted of her older sister, her great-aunt, and her grandmother, who worked as a hotel maid. It was always clear that Claudia was ill at ease as Ricardo, even before she began to sneak into her grandmother's closet to try on her clothes. But it wasn't until high school, and the hormones secreted from Juárez that she started taking after her freshman year, that things came to a head. She transferred to another school where she became an ardent



gymnast, making boys varsity her sophomore and junior years while in the midst of her transition. "I had to put my hair back, and wear my uniform loose because of my breasts. When I was a senior, I left gymnastics because my chest was protruding too much." She switched to cheerleading, but was ridiculed in the locker room by the other girls.

Claudia's role models became the older trans women in her neighborhood in El Paso, "all of them drug addicts and sex workers," who crossed into Juárez to party when the El Paso clubs closed, around 2 A.M. Juárez's red-light district, called the Mariscal, was dense with gay bars and *antros,* clubs featuring drag shows, with cars queuing around the block trawling for prostitutes and American servicemen from Fort Bliss milling around in their fatigues. Claudia finished high school and secured a scholarship to study at the local university, but the temptations of another life pulled her away from El Paso. "I started hanging out more and more with the older girls, and I partied and lost everything," she said. Her drugs of choice were weed and coke, before graduating to what she called "cocoa puffs," an amalgam of the two. From there it was a straight shot to heroin. She hitched rides to New Mexico with truckers ("now those are some crazy suckers") and started doing sex work. She got shot once, in the leg, after lifting someone's wallet in Albuquerque. Another time, a john picked her up on the street, held a pistol to her head, and told her to blow him. "It was a .22. I thought he was joking at first, but then, I was like, 'that's a real gun!' When it was over, I wasn't upset about the gun. I was just upset that he didn't pay me. That's where I was."

* * *

One evening we went for coffee at a small restaurant in Claudia's neighborhood in El Paso called Mocambo, where the waiter took our orders in Spanish. It was a few days after our first joint trip into Juárez, and Claudia was becoming less self-conscious. Her measured dips into anecdote were giving way to splashy recollections. She had always been open with me, but now she was telling me whole stories, all shaggy and episodic. I noticed she was laughing more, too—sometimes at me and my hard-headed questions, but also at the details she was conjuring back up. Claudia gets animated talking about her past because it involves her favorite topic: her own survival. Since she's turned her life around, her past has become a touchstone. The stories she tells are always attached to the mooring of her recovery; it's the rhetorical armature of the rehabilitation rooms—AA, NA, group therapy.

"For so many years, I was a crash dummy," she said. Her voice flared and spittle formed on the corners of her mouth. "I was a puppet. In prison I was a crash dummy, on the streets too. Do this, do that; just to be a part, like when I was shooting. Dame esto. Just to feel better. I'm not a crash dummy no more. I set boundaries quick." We were getting into some of the hard details of her old lifestyle; at moments like this, her confidence in her own survival softened into a disbelief that she'd even made it through.

In 1993, the U.S. government launched Operation Hold the Line, the first of a decade's worth of security initiatives to patch up the border, and the authorities redoubled policing at the bridges. "My friends, the Mexican trannies, had to cross the Rio Grande straight up," she told me, which was to say on foot, either on the far eastern or western ends of town, skirting downtown El Paso, where security was thickest. The eastern section of the Chamizal was their preferred crossing point, and Claudia became its gatekeeper and power broker. "The girls would pass by near the Cordova bridge, through the Chamizal, so they'd cut through my neighborhood to hide out. If the guys messed with them, they would call me, because they all knew where I lived. They'd say, 'They're messing with the girls,' so I'd go over there. It all depends who it was. If it's somebody I didn't like, I'd say, 'Go ahead and do whatever you like.'" It was a free-for-all, with everyone strung out and drug-crazed, capable of doing anything to anyone for another fix. The alliances being what they were, Claudia was wary of downtown El Paso, but not of Juárez. "My protection was here, in my neighborhood. If I was downtown, I was vulnerable. They could give me a hot shot," she said, referring to heroin upped in its potency or laced with something fatal. "In Juárez, I had the protection of my girls. They knew they were going to need me when they would come over here."

Claudia once went by Ricardo, and Ricardo once went by a number: 736627. Her prison ID. The accumulated priors from these years—possession, solicitation, theft, probation violation—landed her in a string of penitentiaries as far away as the Panhandle. She did the math in my notebook: eight years, all told—in around twenty-five, out around thirty-three. When I called the Department of Corrections to confirm the dates, I learned that the terms were staggered, although Claudia remembers them as one unlifting fog. Hearing the prison official call her Ricardo was less jarring to my ears than hearing Claudia referred to as "him." The pronoun, without the name, sounded naked and unprotected.

"Now, they have safekeeping," Claudia told me at Mocambo. "In those times, there was no safekeeping. They would put us—the transgender—with the male population. Safekeeping came out later because of people getting hurt and stuff." She vividly remembers the guard towers on the ride in—a plain and ominous announcement of the danger of her situation. "The girls told me, 'You need to find a boyfriend, you need to find a boyfriend, Claudia.'" She aped the sweet nagging of their voices. "So I was shopping as soon as I got in, hunting, scanning." She pulled her shirt back slightly to reveal the start of a tattoo stamped across her left breast with the name of one boyfriend, Indio, from a prison called The Roach, in Childress. There was also Roger, from Sánchez, in El Paso ("he associated with an El Paso gang, Tango Blast"); a guy called D-Town at Wallace ("black guy, from Dallas"); Robert at Huntsville ("muscular, white guy, he hit with brass knuckles"); and Trinidad at Middleton ("he was serving a life sentence 'cause he killed someone; young, beautiful, really nice").

There were riots when rival gangs would war, the order about to be bucked or else reasserted—these being the two speeds of prison existence. Life was hardest at The Roach; the other inmates were vicious and aggressive. They groped her, swarmed her, hit at her, but never raped her. She couldn't go anywhere without Indio. "We'd go out in the fields, the cotton fields, and pick cotton. The officers were on their horses, and they didn't like me. They knew about my boyfriends, but there were some who didn't like us together because they were racist. I was Hispanic and my boyfriend was white. You got guards there from Childress, Amarillo. Farm-fed people: tall, white." When riots broke out, these guards shrank away, and Claudia had to protect herself from threats on the inside. "I've lived through seven riots.



Claudia and her friend Marty at a fast-food restaurant along the border. Marty buys hormones in bulk at a pharmacy in Juárez, then sells them at a mark-up in El Paso. They are among the few trans women from El Paso who hazard the trip into Juárez. The other women, according to Marty, "have fear—either that or they're illegal. If they go across, they won't come back."

There were plates flying. People fighting each other off, stabbing, blood everywhere. Out in the rec yard, the guys took weights off the bench press and were bashing each other with them. It was a 2,000-man unit. Sometimes they took over the prison for two days. They could have killed me if they wanted to. When the guards finally came out, they'd be all geared up, like with tear gas. They'd start breaking collarbones. If you don't fall on the floor when they come in, now that . . ." Her thought drifted, and she started free associating about the guards. "Got shot with rubber bullets, I got gassed."

Our conversation had returned to hushed tones, and I stood up to pay. Outside, the pinkening sky melted in with the fading cerulean wash of the restaurant's walls, and the room darkened to a faint purple. The woman at the register leaned over conspiratorially as she dished out my change, and asked me, with a dusting of formal *usteds,* what we were talking about. Her tone was less prying than guileless. "Are you with an agency?" she asked and pointed at my notebook. "Are you here to help find the girls?" I wasn't expecting this, certainly not here on the El Paso side. Though the Juárez femicides made international headlines in the Nineties, they were never solved or stemmed, and the murders have continued.

"My friend in Juárez, her daughter disappeared some years ago," the cashier said. "We've never seen her again, but someone said she may have escaped to El Paso. Who's that you're with?" She thought Claudia, all aged and weathered, might be the missing daughter, limping out after years away.

* * *

Some of Claudia's friends know about her past, but not all of them, and even those who are closest to her know the story only in fragments. A sort of biographical uncertainty principle is at work: someone knows about her street years but not the prison time, or about the prison time but not the sex work. Her "hetero lady friends," as she calls them, have had ugly marriages and divorces; they've all seen each other low.

Her neighborhood is tiny in every sense. She bumps into her clients from work at the dollar store where she buys gifts for "baby Alan." She stops into El Paraiso Fruit Stand on Alameda for groceries and chats with her friend Güera, who's known her through her childhood and her street days. They never talked about the

past until I showed up with Claudia one day, and she playfully badgered Güera, who's gray-haired and bespectacled, a paragon of barrio discretion, into telling me how it was. "Oh she was bad," Güera says. "She was always on the street, her arms *picada*" —track marked— "robbing." Claudia never held anyone up at Güera's store, but she would at others—typically the bigger ones, chain establishments, stuff that sat more lightly on her conscience. "Güera and other people aren't scared of me or resentful, not anymore. It's because they can see the change," Claudia said. "They respect the change in me." I thought of the river when she told me this, the debate over its gradual versus sudden shift in course, and the question of which was more definitional to what it was and where it belonged. Her neighbors and friends show their trust by dismissing Claudia's old stories with a wave of the hand, like they're all past and unimportant now. But Claudia can't conceal her pride in having righted herself. "I woke up feeling grateful," she recently wrote on her Facebook wall. "I have learned how to discipline myself to nurture myself so I can be productive and live a balanced life."

Claudia's job as a drug counselor bridges the disparate chapters of her past; the sense of continuity this affords her has perhaps saved her life. At work, her transformation isn't a blight or a backstory but a credential. Her clients feel she understands what they're living, and they seek her out on the streets and call her work-issued cell phone at all hours of the night. She acts exasperated when she digs the phone out of her purse at dinner, though she clearly revels in the importance of her task, and she works constantly. She has won awards and recognition for her outreach, and is venerated by her colleagues. I spent hours sitting with her at her agency's central offices in El Paso, where she reports five days a week to administer AIDS tests, keep case files, and lead group therapy sessions for recovering addicts in for their methadone.

One day she darted out of her office to lead a methadone group session, and I followed her, tucking myself into the back of the room. The theme of her session was relationships. "What is your definition of a relationship?" she asked a group of about ten people, who looked to be from their mid-twenties up through their sixties and all in varying stages of withdrawal stupor. She spoke about how to set boundaries, and she freely brought up her own story: "I'm an addict," she said, "an ex-street junkie. I'm not like other people. When I came into recovery eight years ago, I had to actually cut off 80 percent of my relationships, and some were family, because they would jeopardize my recovery." It was a masterful talk not least because it wasn't put on. Her listeners bobbed and slumped as they came in and out of methadone reveries, but they perked up at the sound of Claudia's voice, with its earned authority.

A couple times a week Claudia goes into El Paso's worst neighborhoods: the heroin dens along the border downtown, on the outskirts of the old Segundo Barrio; the coke and crack warrens of the northeast known as the "Devil's Triangle," for its drugs, prostitution, and gangs. We went to a homeless shelter in an alley one day, and the guys flocked immediately to our car, not to plead for money but to greet Claudia, then to ask if she brought condoms. "Watch out for Speedy," she told me, gesturing toward an old guy slumped in a wheelchair out front, as I avoided feet and tried to park. She walked into the shelter to distribute pamphlets in advance of a sex education class. She moved around almost invisibly—a sort of expert slinking, both being seen and not—and every once in a while she brushed off a grisly suitor who announced himself with some obscenity. On the street, she told a young man with a thick beard that she saw him dealing the other day when she was out giving people HIV tests. "I was going to come over to chat, but I saw you were working," she said. Claudia spoke matter-of-factly and without judgment. She never scolds or sermonizes on the streets, but lets herself ease into the scene—an unthreatening fixture mingled in with the crowd.

We got into the car and drove to the Devil's Triangle, exiting the interstate on a run-down boulevard named Dyer Street. The air seemed thin up here. There were auto-repair shops; dilapidated, high-vacancy motels advertising monthly rates; gas stations and the odd diner; and carwashes, which sold crack pipes and called them happy meals, meaning they came complete with a little silver bristle for cleaning. Claudia had me park in front of a motel complex called the Hawaiian Royale, its squat brick units outfitted with turquoise doors. One woman in a parking lot nearby had her back to us and was standing before a white Toyota Camry, fishing out a Big Gulp cup from an open trunk. Claudia had to call out a few times for the woman to hear her, and I immediately grew anxious. These were battered types, in obvious drug throes, and I had the sense that everyone would just want to be left alone to stew and wallow. I was wrong. "Oh Claudia, I was just thinking about you," the woman said. "It's been crazy here. My kids came to visit me the other day, and the manager complained because he thought it was crack traffic." Her husband, who appeared on the balcony in pajamas, stumbled toward the banister and waved.

We doubled back to inspect a maze of rooms behind the front part of the motel. We were in remote quarters, and beyond view of the roadway. I tucked my notebook into my pocket and stashed my pen. Claudia had told me to dress rattier for the trip, and I'd gone unshaven, wearing a wrinkled, drooping t-shirt and worn-out sneakers. But mine was shabby armor. I stood out, and knew it. My posture was too upright, my eyes flitting and primed: all the obvious tells of an interloper. Claudia ignored my unease, and seemed not to care much about the desolateness of our surroundings.

A tall man in gray sweats quietly entered a room with an open door, carrying something in a balled-up fist. He came out seconds later, the fist still clenched, but with green bills poking out at the base of his hand. Claudia went up to him to introduce herself, launching into a quick spiel about her work and asking, at the end, if it was OK for her to poke around some more. "You might not want to approach people around here like that," he said, in a booming, threatening voice. A beige Ford Explorer full of guys idled for him at the corner, and I could see their heads turning toward us. The man stood over Claudia, stiff and unsmiling. She just laughed, "Oh stop!" Her voice was flirtatious, not at all what this guy was expecting, and he shook his head and marched over to the car. I told Claudia we should go. The Explorer waited until I turned the key before pulling away, its tires screeching as it left us in the dust.

* * *

Claudia only knows of one other trans woman in El Paso who still goes to Juárez: Marty, a thirty-seven-year-old sex worker who walks across each week to buy hormones in bulk from a pharmacy on the strip, to sell them later in El Paso at a mark-up. We went off in search of her one night around dinnertime.

She and Claudia had met years ago at a Grey-

hound Station just as Claudia was getting out of prison, when they were both still addicts. The history sometimes makes it complicated with Marty when their paths cross. Claudia might be out showing interns from the university how to conduct street interventions with addicts while Marty's right there working, stoned and embarrassed about it. "She's had it tough," Claudia said. "Things are better now; she's using the money she makes on the street for her apartment, not for drugs."

I parked in back of a McDonald's while Claudia went to look for her at a bus station on the eastern periphery of downtown. It wasn't clear if Marty was out on the street working that night, or if she'd come from her apartment nearby and wanted to keep her distance until she met me. I was waiting outside the car in the flickering neon glow of the parking lot when I saw them emerge from the shadows. Marty is Claudia's height but stockier, with a doughy, rouged face and storybook dimples. She wore a dark hoodie, a long black t-shirt, tiny gray shorts, and flip-flops; her neck was wrapped in a tattoo. A light drizzle fell, and the wind whipped. Marty pulled her sweatshirt tight around her shoulders, and greeted me with a limp handshake. Claudia decided on a Whataburger a few blocks away, next to Bowie High School. We ordered burgers, and sat down in a booth, Marty and Claudia pressed into one side opposite me. Their backs faced Mexico, and as they talked about Juárez it was like we were telling secrets about the other side.

"A lot of people are still getting murdered. When they would kill women, they used to rape them and murder them," Marty said, of an older brand of street violence. "They were targeting women. Not too long ago, they were targeting cartels. Now, they're just killing people just to kill them. They're not focusing on certain people. In Juárez, if you get in trouble with the wrong person, they'll kill you." Maybe the killings were subsiding, but to Marty they've become more mysterious in their ebb. The biggest threat in her view is the police, and that will never change. "They'll stop you for nothing. It could be just minding your own business, respecting everybody or whatever, being a good person. They'll stop you if you have money, just to rob you. That's how it's done."

"Marty's always by herself," Claudia explained, then grafted some history onto the account, drawing from her Nineties days. "If they see three or four trannies, they would stop us. They get more money out of you in a group. If the cops stop you, if they're kicking you, people don't barge in."

Marty avoided talking about how Claudia was when they first met, but Claudia prodded her. "Go on, tell him—don't hold back. He knows me." Marty narrowed her eyes, still cautious.

"When I first met Claudia she looked really strung out. I saw her and said, 'Oh my god. I don't want to end up like that.' I would always tell myself that. Her appearance just looked . . . so tired, so worn out."

"I was a real addict," Claudia confirmed. "I was using everything. I was a rough girl."

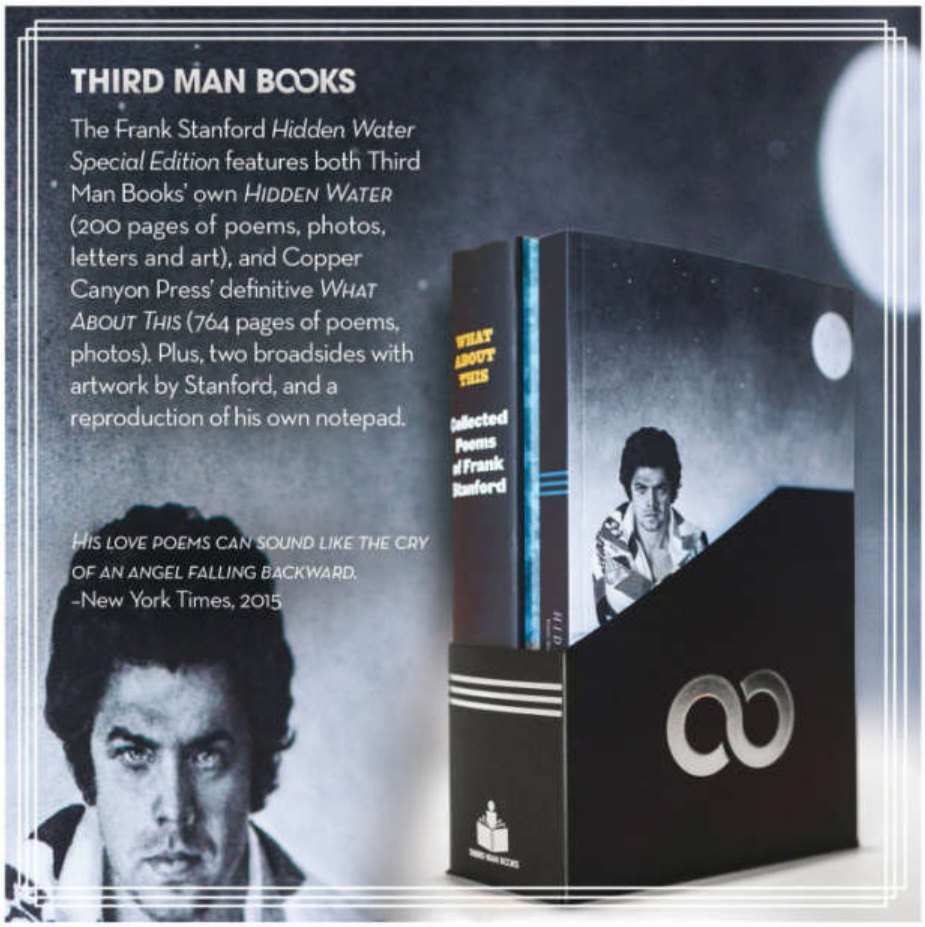
"Then, she disappeared for a while, and boom, she came back, looked a lot better," Marty said. "That was in 2007. Then, I became what she was."

Two highway cops walked into the restaurant, in trim beige uniforms and motorcycle helmets. Claudia could see them but Marty couldn't. She sat up a little straighter, and followed them with her eyes, glancing casually over her shoulder as they passed to keep them in her sightline. She was careful not to act startled, for Marty's sake. This is where her life and Claudia's diverge: Claudia no longer lives on tenterhooks. She's crossed over to the side of the sober and law-abiding, if not quite into the ranks of quotidian respectability. Only after they left did she tell Marty, who bolted upright and looked around, although by then, with no lawmen around to stoke it, her anxiety quickly cooled, and she continued talking. Claudia, meanwhile, had turned her attention to a child one booth over from us who caught her eye and had begun playing hide-and-seek over one of the partitions dividing the tables. The child's mother noticed, stole a look at Claudia, and pulled her daughter in close.

I asked them about the new generation of El Paso trans girls, and if they visited Juárez. Though Claudia is a decade older than Marty, both remember the years of *tardeadas* and clubbing along the Mariscal, and talk openly about their nostalgia.

"If they're young, they probably went over as boys, but they haven't as girls," Claudia said.

"No, they won't go," Marty added. "They



have fear—either that or they're illegal. If they go across, they won't come back."

* * *

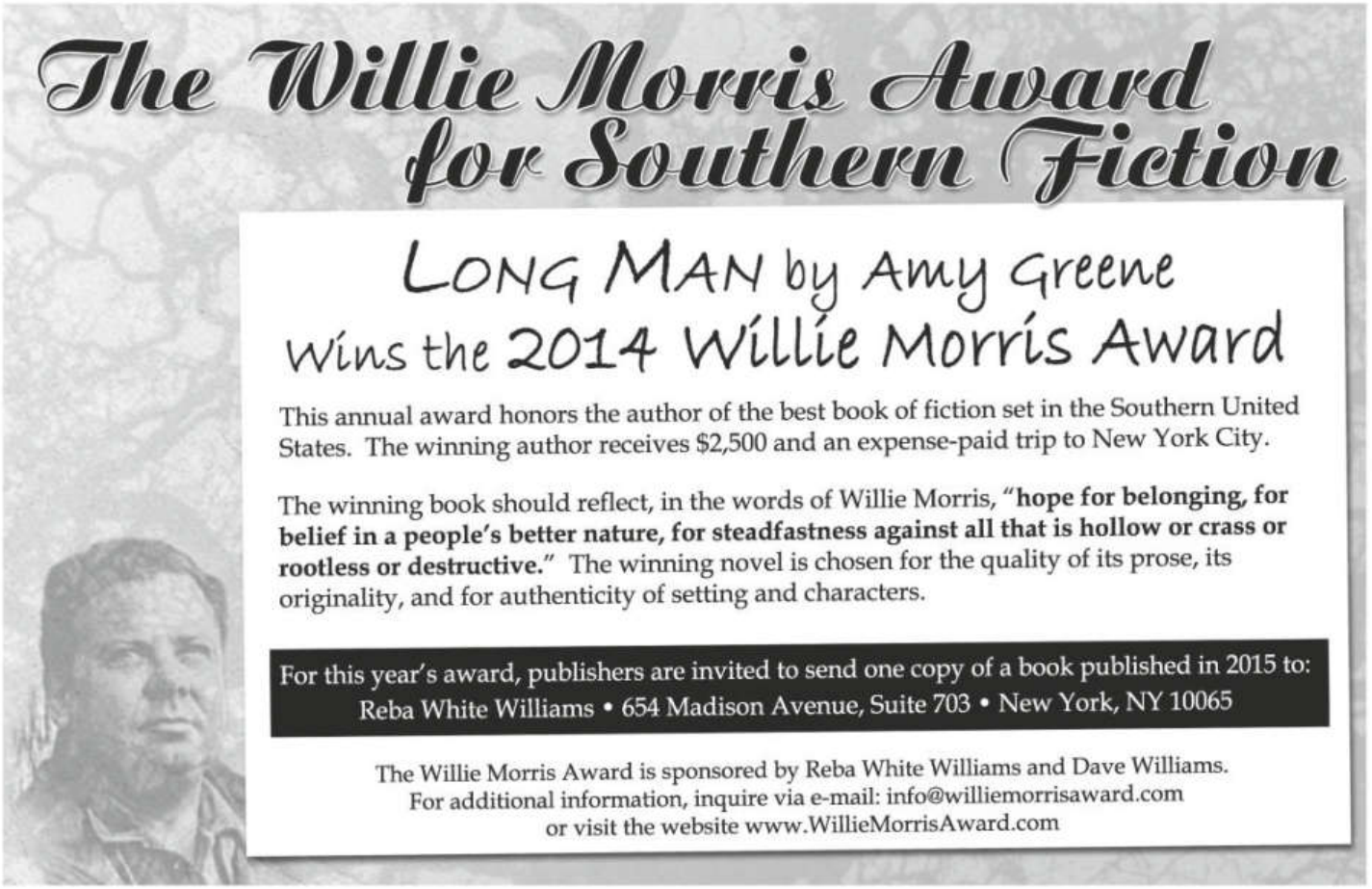
Who's left? Claudia can count them on a single hand: three women from her core entourage. The rest are ghosts, by the names of Linda, Frances, Rachael, Lucy, Missy, Julie. Lone among the living on the El Paso side is Bobby, a butch, red-haired fifty-nine-year-old hairdresser, who has signed her life over to AA and sees Claudia on the recovery circuit. Bobby's turf as a prostitute had been downtown, farther west than Claudia's spot in the Chamizal. She used to go into Juárez to dance and score and is now a kind of nativist foil to Claudia. She despises the Mexican girls of old, and her bias is understandable, considering. For one, the Mexicans were all voluptuousness and glamour, upstaging the Americans. They were also violently criminal—robbers, gun-toters, fighters.

Bobby put it this way: "They were all thieves. What they did over here ruined stuff for us hookers because they started taking us all off the streets. There were twenty whores to a corner, and there were tons of corners. And most of them were wetbacks. Everybody was going to jail. Thirty or forty of us at a time. Me and Claudia have lived our lives as women. Those other girls with the cheesy tits—those aren't women, those are men trying to be women. It just wasn't real. We were the real girls."

One day last December, Claudia heard from another long-lost Juarense friend named Claudio, whom she hadn't seen since the mid-1990s. For a time, Claudia thought that Claudio was dead, but she'd recently gotten curious and sought her out on Facebook, with felicitous results. We went over one morning for a reunion at an old café in downtown Juárez called the Nueva Central. Walking over the bridge, I asked Claudia what seemed obvious: if she could find Claudio so easily, she must not have been looking too hard for her in the first place. The truth was hard for Claudia to confront, and it came out gradually over the following days, and even then only sparingly. At heart, I gathered, the reunion scared her: not the prospect of seeing Claudio, whom she adores, but the symbolism of it and the tug of the old life brought on by being south of the border in redolent company. Claudia treated any reunion as if it were an undertow that could suck her back at any moment.

Claudio works as a nurse at medical clinics in the city, and goes out on weekends with the other trans women. She no longer uses hard drugs, and has even stopped taking her hormones. "I don't know if she goes by Claudio or Claudia now," Claudia told me, as we walked down Juárez Avenue. "Her Facebook says Claudio, but I'm going to call her Claudia, and see if that's okay, because that's how I know her. She works as a man now."

As we neared the front of the restaurant, Claudia spotted her old friend but didn't immediately react, maybe because she didn't trust that it was her. They walked into a kind of mutual, slow-rolling recognition, pausing to be sure who each was looking at, then pantomiming surprise in unison. They hugged and gasped. Claudio wore a black fitted baseball cap with a flat brim and a leather jacket with SUPER BOWL XXXVI stitched onto the lapel. She was androgynous, and walked with a thick-



footed shuffle. I asked which name she preferred—Claudia or Claudio—but she told me she didn't care. "The girls from before know me as Claudia, and the younger ones know me as Claudio," she said. "It's the same to me."

Once we got inside, they just kept looking at each other in happy disbelief. Claudio almost seemed to be moaning with delight, making euphoric, breathy noises.

"Y la Rachael?" Claudio asked.

"Se murió," Claudia responded.

"Y la Cubi?"

"The older one died of hepatitis; the younger one died from heroin."

In Spanish, the names of their dead friends had an honorific sounding definite article dangled in front of each one, like they were stage names, exalted identities. Claudia turned to me and said, in English, "Oh, I'm so excited," then spun right back to Claudio. "Y la Tokyo?" she asked.

"Dead," said Claudio. "They're all dead."

We ordered raisin bread and *cafés con leche* that a beady-eyed waitress brought over in tall, plastic cafeteria cups.

They are both survivors, and know it. Each one has decided to go into drug outreach work—Claudia north of the border and Claudio south of it. She works with a small group of trans women called Grupo Fanny—named for a beloved late friend—that caters to the needs of Juárez's trans community, almost exclusively sex workers, and conducts sex education classes and AIDS testing all over the city. It's a rag-tag operation run out of the founder's apartment in the bombed-out remains of the old red-light district.

The two talked about work, as the past kept resurfacing and washed in like a tide, floating reminiscences. "In those years, you couldn't go out on the streets here as a woman," Claudio said. "But crossing to El Paso was easy. You'd go right over the bridge, and they'd just wave you through. All you had to say was 'American citizen,' in English, and you passed." She said it now with a thick Mexican accent, as she must have also said it then. "Every once in a while, and this was rare, they'd ask what school you studied at in El Paso. But you could just invent any school in El Paso, and it was fine."

Claudio said that the bridges had been closed up in 1994, like it was literal, but in point of fact security just ramped up, as it would again—even further and irrevocably—after 9/11. "Then, we started crossing the river ourselves. In canoes, or little rafts. Whoever got himself wet to guide the raft over would have to get paid. Fifty cents."

"Sometimes we just walked or swam across," Claudia added.

"We'd poke across, the water splashing around, and we'd hold the *niños* high over our head," Claudio said.

"The niños?" I asked. Were they smuggling children over, too? Claudio and Claudia laughed at this, and swayed gleefully in their seats. I was on the outside, missing the slang.

The niños, they explained, were the sponges and padding they used to doll themselves up—the breast and butt enhancers, the packing they used around their calves and thighs. It was all part of the chunky, flashy fashions of the time. They loaded up their clothes with the niños, packing them every which way, and forded the Rio Grande, struggling to keep them dry like their lives depended on it.

"You'd pass the *migra*"—border cops—"coming in like this, and they'd just say, 'what-





Claudia has always bought her hormones in Juárez, where they're cheaper and can be purchased without insurance. Juárez is where she first transitioned as a teenager. "I make myself up in Juárez," she said.

ever, they'll grab you farther in and deport you.' I had various friends who were with immigration. I knew them from my work." Claudio grinned.

"Extracurricular activities," Claudia said sagely.

Claudio wanted to introduce us to Deborah Álvarez, the forty-one-year-old founder of Grupo Fanny, and so we left the café and walked back out onto the street, passing a group of besuited, silver-haired men singing Beatles songs by the church to a clapping crowd. Claudio lives nearby. During the worst of the drug years, when bullets whizzed off the streets and through apartment windows, she used to sleep on the floor of her bedroom to stay clear of the strafing. We walked up a street called Otumba, where trans women worked the corners in broad daylight wearing mini skirts and spiked heels despite the cold. One of them, Vicki, came over to greet us.

We arrived at a green cement building with bars on its windows that looked semi-abandoned, and climbed up a narrow, dank stairway that opened onto a single floor, with a doorless bathroom and a bedroom where Deborah was waiting for us, nursing a hangover. A man lay in her bed, covered in blankets and still, apparently, sleeping. Purple satin curtains covered the windows and two paintings hung on the walls—one of them of a reclining nude rendered in dripping streaks of orange and red with male and female genitalia and the other, in green, of a woman caressing herself from the waist down. "This is Claudia, from Alameda," Claudio told Deborah. I took a seat in an arched leather chair made to look like a high heel.

Deborah is the protector of the Juárez trans community, and has been since 2005, when she returned—she grew up here—after being deported from Los Angeles. "I was coming down the steps from the bridge from the U.S. and the police picked me up immediately for being dressed like a woman. I knew what this was about because I am from Juárez, so I could put up with it. The cops picked us up, roughed us up." Like the other trans women in Juárez she found work on the streets because nothing else was available to her. "When we went downtown we had to walk around *disfrazadas,* with our hair in buns and covered by hats, no makeup, in men's clothes." She slowly began to organize, though for a while it wasn't clear how to outmaneuver the police. Deborah started taking tallies, keeping track of incidents,

gathering evidence and presenting it to the public prosecutor—almost always in vain. She referred to her work, particularly its fruitlessness early on, as "puro cosecho"—belabored reaping, a constant struggle. Things got worse before they got better. In May 2006, the municipal government launched a campaign to rid the downtown area of prostitution and gangs, providing the cops with an official cover for their abusiveness. "Each one of our apartments was overrun. On the first day of the new campaign, eighty-five women were beaten up by cops—slapped, pistol whipped, shot with rubber bullets. They liked shooting at our implants, particularly. Breasts. Hips."

Claudia listened, enrapt, and Claudio looked on approvingly, nodding each time Deborah pronounced her favorite words: *hicimos un escándalo* (we made a scandal). For Claudia, it had been a scandal just to be seen on the streets of Juárez, but Deborah had turned that overexposure into a tactic; if the trans women of Juárez were conspicuous, all the better to make a scene. They demonstrated at government offices and succeeded in removing from town one particularly brutal unit of the municipal police, known as "la patrulla diabólica" both for its aggression and the number on its squad car, which was 666. Eventually, Deborah went into hiding because cops publicly threatened to kill her.

When the federal government called in national troops to combat the cartels, in 2008, the trans women had three groups to worry about: federal troops, who would rob and rape them; the souped up police forces; and the cartels themselves, which made sex workers pay extortion fees in excess of 200 pesos a week. "We had to work from our windows," Deborah said, because there was a citywide curfew. "We simply had to have those payments. We wouldn't eat."

We listened without saying much, until a police siren rang out in the distance and Claudia leapt to her feet. I stood up with her, on pure reflex, and at this, Deborah's lover, whose eyes had stealthily crept above the blanket, let out a laugh. Deborah gently waved us down, and the noise subsided.

In 2009, Deborah ran for federal office as a candidate for senate on a third-party ticket. One day, after campaigning, she changed into party clothes (skirt, heels), stepped out of her apartment, and was swarmed by cops, out on their usual beat. They threw her into the back of their truck and drove around town for a few hours before finally arriving at the police station. By the time they pulled up, protestors had assembled and party officials turned out from the capital. The police chief tried to let Deborah go discreetly, and pleaded with her to go home, but she refused. "He said to me, 'I'm sorry, we didn't know who you were. And I said, 'No, sir, I'm sorry, because you're going to lose your job.'"

Claudia clapped. Deborah now has a direct line to the mayor; she's led solidarity marches and recently began training local cops on how to interact more respectfully with trans sex workers on the streets of Juárez. She can hardly believe it herself. "It's better now, Claudia. We've changed things." She and Claudio were pitching Claudia, trying to convince her Juárez had gotten safer for trans women.

"Ever since all this happened, the girls can walk around dressed as women from top to bottom," Claudio said. Claudia grinned with satisfaction. She proposed coming over again one evening for them all to go out dancing, and Claudio promised to meet her at the bridge and pick her up.

After an hour or so, Claudio led us out and walked us back to the bridge, and we cut through the old Mariscal, now just a field of rubble with buildings in various stages of destruction and decay. I trailed behind the two of them, as they walked arm in arm, pointing out by name where all the old bars used to be.

* * *

In April, I flew back to visit. A small contingent of students was throwing a queer prom at the University of Texas El Paso, and Claudia had been asked to give a speech at the banquet. A lot had happened in my most recent absence. Claudia had moved from her old apartment to a well-appointed brick house a block away with a broad, tree-filled yard and a garden out back. She wasn't alone in the house, either. She had adopted a seventeen-year-old intersex girl whom I'll call Laura and who had been put up for foster care because of neglect and abuse at home. A local advocacy group tasked with placing her couldn't find a proper surrogate set-up until someone plugged into the El Paso LGBT circuit proposed Claudia. We had spoken about the prospect of kids several months before, when we went shopping for Alan's Christmas gift, and she told me then that she didn't want to be a parent. Observing her work with vulnerable clients, I took her for a natural mother, but she barely let me get the question out at the time. "It's just too late," she said.

But these were special circumstances—Laura was already seventeen, and would soon be a legal adult. She just needed someone to look out for her in the meantime. She'd never been to an endocrinologist or to a therapist, and was shy and tentative. Claudia took the opportunity as a sign of sorts, a chance to achieve her dream of being a mother. Soon, a flurry of messages appeared on Facebook, to which she posted photos with her "adoptive daughter." It was a telling formulation because the dependency was mutual. I'd never seen Claudia so happy.

Laura is tall and pretty, with short blond hair and the slightly stiff gait and manner of a kid transitioning out of adolescence. Her features are scattered with only the slightest masculine traces—a subtly pronounced Adam's apple, vaguely muscular hands. On more than one occasion, she's asked Claudia how she can manage to be so open about her own identity. Claudia calls her "mi hija," protective and eager to dispense advice of any sort. She decided that Laura needed to learn better manners, and her teachings took on a loving bite. "I tell her, 'Don't copy me, be you. Just be lady-like,'" Claudia said.

The night of the prom, Claudia and Laura turned out in ball gowns—perfectly, beautifully overdressed. Attendance couldn't have cracked more than thirty or forty people. The student organizers stopped them as they walked in to snap their photos in front of the University crest, and Laura, ever the Facebook coquette, popped out her hip and puckered her lips for the camera. "No, mi hija," Claudia said. "You don't do that for a formal." Laura stiffened; the camera flashed. "Now, I'm tagging you in this one," Claudia said, and they whipped out their phones in synchrony.

Toward the end of the night, after the speeches and the food, there was dancing, and the lights dimmed. A salsa tune came on and Laura bobbed to the music, but got tangled trying to swivel her hips. Claudia took her by the hand, spun her a couple times, then demonstrated the effect, holding her torso steady so her legs almost seemed to ripple out beneath her. Laura watched, and laughed, as Claudia showed her how to move.



KYRIE, WITH ENDNOTES

A STORY BY JAMIE QUATRO

"Untitled," by Eric Ogden



FOR NEDDY HILL, giver of the first kiss,
Bobby Breman, *No way, Jose,*
Todd Winston, who knows his days of the week,
David Mellor, George to her Martha,
and Joe Telford, bell ringer, initials carver, home-run hitter:
Have mercy.

FOR MR. ERWIN, who will not let her run to the nurse,
and Mr. Jamison, who hangs loose:
Have mercy.

FOR JOHN EVERLY, second giver of the first kiss,
Barry Smith, who says I Love You and puts a finger inside,
Nick Vernon, who has premature ejaculation,
though she thinks she isn't sucking/licking/touching right,
and Nick's mother and stepfather, who drive them to Sabino Canyon and let them drink whiskey from the bottle and tell them if they, she and Nick, would like to have sex in the back of the van it's fine, they won't watch—not knowing that they, she and Nick, are still, technically, virgins:
Have mercy.

FOR BRAD LANE, who secretly fucks Stephanie after school, daily, standing up in a props closet in the drama building,
Paul Ransom, bodybuilder, trying not to be gay,
Scott Akin, who says it's too late for Paul,
and Tony DiCosmo, expert on the female orgasm:
Have mercy.

FOR SAMUEL, who turns out to be The One,
Brad Lane, who realizes too late he would like to be The One,
Nick Vernon and Tony DiCosmo, ditto Brad Lane:
Have mercy.

FOR WEALTHY ANDREW, who claims Samuel is a Test From The Devil,
And for wealthy Geoffrey, who holds her hand and kisses her cheek and says her name because it is the same name as the ex-girlfriend who died when a bus hit the passenger side of his car after he made an illegal turn, and saying her name while holding her hand and kissing her cheek brings him unspeakable comfort:
Have mercy.

FOR BRANDON WEST, with whom she allows herself a pre-wedding fling on the beach, no kissing or touching, just holding one another, nude, wrapped in a blanket, salt-wet skin-on-skin with one last male body before she commits for life; but when Brandon tells her, two weeks before her wedding, that he has fallen deeply, irrevocably in love, and she cannot confirm that the feeling is mutual, he quits college and never graduates and eight years later dies from a brain tumor, still single, his parents and sister at his bedside:
Have mercy.

FOR DONALD NEFF, who, though she is now married, takes off his shirt and pulls her head into his lap,
For Marcus Ligon, who is unhappy in his marriage and idealizes hers and leaves erotically charged notes, written on the backs of receipts, on her desk at work,
For the trainer whose name she's forgotten, who tells her she's his Billboard Client and says he dreams, often, of fucking her on the racquetball court,
and for Richard Stein, with whom she has a six-month affair and after whom she decides she has finished with even looking at other men, she will hereafter teach herself to identify *no-fly zones,* men with whom she can tell there would be chemistry if she, or he, allowed it:
Have mercy.

AND FOR WILL DEMAREST, composer in London, with whom she will take up a lifetime correspondence, always wondering if it will turn into something, which it never will—and while during the early years of their back-and-forth, when she sees his name come up in her inbox, she will feel a liquid heat spread downward from her throat, in a few more years she will have learned to repress that response, maintain equilibrium, will force herself to think of *stewarding the friendship,* keeping her own letters *above reproach,* until, far into the future, his name will come up and it will be just a name. And in that far-off time, when his name appears, she will think: By His grace and mercy, in His longsuffering kindness, The Lord has allowed me to move beyond all that mess in my past. All that mess in my past The Lord has, finally, redeemed:

Have mercy. Have mercy.

* NOTES *

1. WILL DEMAREST
Redemption uncertain. Composing-of-emails conducted in fear and trembling.

2. SAMUEL
Married twenty-four years to.

3. DONALD, MARCUS, TRAINER, RICHARD
Through whom she discovers that illicit desire is the most charged, most thrilling kind. Through Richard in particular she learns that, after the first erotic hit—removal of clothing, skin touching skin (for the rest of her life she will admit that was otherworldly)—guilt begins to nullify illicit desire. Still: she understands, now, Esau's selling-of-birthright-for-bowl-of-soup. In that moment, finally alone together after months of build up, Richard on his knees in front of her with his face pressed into her belly, moaning, her own hands tangled in his hair, pushing his head lower, lower—there is nothing she would not have sold, even her inheritance. Meaning (loathing herself) her own children.

4. BRANDON WEST
Film producer with houses in Paris and the Bahamas. (Brain tumor made up.) Married, two kids. She follows him on Instagram. Every so often she allows herself to think, *What if.*

5. WEALTHY GEOFFREY
No regrets, least she could do, Samuel would understand, etc.

6. WEALTHY ANDREW
Sometimes she wonders: if she and Samuel end up divorced, or one of them dies, or something terrible happens to one of their children, will Wealthy Andrew think, I told her so?

7. SAMUEL
Has four children with.

8. BRAD, NICK, TONY
College, fall break. Each sits in her living room and hems, haws: You're too young to be engaged, we should date, take it seriously this time. How do you know Samuel is The One. I just know, she says. What she doesn't say is that she could never be with a guy for whom she feels sorry, and the very act of coming here

to express their regrets (too late) makes her feel both embarrassed and sorry for them in a way that means she could never take them seriously.

9. SAMUEL

College boyfriend. Has intercourse with. Becomes engaged to.

10. TONY DiCOSMO

Parents out of town. In his bedroom, she's lying on top, moving her hips side to side, wearing tight jeans, something overtaking her, dizzy, she shudders, rolls off. Something's wrong with me, I feel like I might pass out. He sits up and holds her hand. You were just about to have an orgasm. You don't need to be afraid. If you want to try again I can help. She tries again. He shows her where to touch, first with his hand, then with her own. You were amazingly quiet, he says when she's finished. Oh, she says. Next time I'll be louder.

11. SCOTT AKIN

Paul Ransom's friend, 27. He comes into the yogurt shop after closing. She's alone, in back, making waffle cones for the next day. I'm going to try something, he says. Lifts her onto the counter so she is seated on the edge, pulls her against him and forces her legs to wrap around behind, kisses her hard on the mouth, runs hand up her leg inside her shorts, beneath underwear. Two, three fingers inside. She feels him hard against her thigh. I knew it, he says. All those steroids Paul takes. He said it was you, that you didn't know how to kiss, how to turn a guy on. He always blames the girls. He's ruined himself for women. Delicate brushstroke of pink on her thigh, his fingers. Not that time-of-month, she tells him. You're a *virgin*? Shit. I need to go take a cold shower.

12. PAUL RANSOM

He, 26; she, 16. Brings her to his apartment and sits beside her on the couch. I am going to kiss you now. You're not doing it right. Make your lips tighter. Looser. Use your tongue more. Less. No, like this. Like this. Dammit, you're not doing it right. What she is thinking: dead fish my brother a pastor an old man a wall a nothing zero door slamming shut.

13. BRAD LANE

When she finds out about Stephanie she forgives him, though they break up. Brad is deeply troubled, his mother committed suicide that summer and he's the one who found her, in a bathtub filled with pillows, still holding the gun.

14. NICK VERNON

First to ejaculate in front of her. Very little fluid. She assumes he's stopping short so she won't gag or get too much of the taste. He apologizes each time. She will learn the term premature ejaculation seven years later, when a newly married friend confesses that her husband suffers, but there is hope, correctional drugs are in development. There is nothing to be said for Nick's mother and stepfather. Their interest in his sexual activity and his struggles with PE are certainly not unrelated.

15. BARRY SMITH

Cooks pasta for her after, by way of apology, because the finger hurts, and she cries.

16. JOHN EVERLY

A period of awkwardness between sixth grade and sophomore year, followed by braces removal and nose job, followed by the Fourth of July at the lake in Iowa, the day she meets John, with whom she takes a canoe ride along the shoreline at dusk. When it's dark they jump in and swim. They climb onto an empty dock and he kisses her beneath fireworks—first on her neck, then on her lips—and because he leaves the next day to go home to Minnesota and she will never see him again, the day in general, and the kiss in particular, will remain the most perfect, faultless things in all her life, until her children are born.

17. MR. JAMISON

Fifth grade English teacher, wears short-shorts to play in a faculty basketball game, students seated on the court sidelines, looking up from beneath while he takes jump-shots. She is not at school that day, so when the term begins to circulate, with snickers and wrinkled noses, she thinks it refers to Mr. Jamison's long hair and flip-flops, the way he sometimes sits on the edge of his desk, swinging a leg in what she would call a *hang loose* manner.

18. MR. ERWIN

Fifth grade math teacher. Here we enter dark territory. Here we must speak up for the girl who does not understand the term *hang loose.* It's near Halloween. Mr. Erwin keeps her and Anne Thomas in from recess to decorate windows with cats, witches, ghosts. They stand on chairs and roll Scotch tape while Mr. Erwin watches. He tells the girls he is going up to his cabin on Mount Lemmon that weekend, and he would like to bring them along for a sleepover. *A slumber party, just the three of us.* Then he laughs. *That's a little joke,* he says. Anne laughs too, and keeps doing the windows. He asks the other girl to come up to his desk. He tells her, in her ear, that if the girls did come to his cabin, they wouldn't need to bring any clothes, he would wrap them in cellophane nightgowns, and she feels sick, she should run to the nurse before she throws up but Mr. Erwin runs after her in the hallway and grabs her arm. It was a joke, doesn't she understand adult humor? She must not be as grown-up as he thought she was, if she can't understand adult humor. How embarrassing for her, Anne understands adult humor and she doesn't, and she knows Mr. Erwin is right, the nurse will only laugh at her because she doesn't understand adult humor, she doesn't understand *hang loose* and now Mr. Erwin won't ask her to stay in from recess anymore. The next day he tells Anne Thomas, while the class is in line waiting to go to lunch, that she has beautiful mahogany eyes. He could get lost in such beautiful mahogany eyes. She skips lunch and goes to the girls' bathroom and stays in a stall. Her own eyes are not beautiful and she doesn't understand adult humor and Mr. Erwin will not keep her in from recess again.

19. JOE TELFORD

Shows interest in her before she has interest in him. In this way she learns that, no matter how she feels to begin with, if a boy likes her in *a certain way,* a reciprocal interest will arise. An interest-in-kind. Thus when Joe passes her a note with the names of the girls in fourth grade listed, with boxes beside their names and instructions: *Check the box beside the girl you like,* and her name is checked—when he passes her a second note with boys listed, same boxes and instructions—a melting responsiveness inside of her rears its head in a gathered peak. She triple-checks his name and adds a smiley face. Initials-carving ensues, followed by *This one's for you, Sweets* every time he comes up to the plate. He's the first Jewish boy she knows. He invites her to his house for dinner one Friday, all the lights turned out, shades drawn to block out the desert sun, his mother and father covering their eyes with their hands while they sing a sad song in another language. She thinks the song must be about God and how

He made them wander around in the desert for so long, and the music is beautiful but she is glad she is Presbyterian. After the song and meal, Joe whispers, Let's blow this popsicle stand. They sneak into the cloistered stucco monastery in the desert behind their neighborhood, all coolness and interior shadow, statues and low-burning candles that belong to neither of their religions. He puts her hand on the thick rope in the bell tower, covers it with his own. *Pull,* he says.

20. DAVID MELLOR

Requirements for role of Martha Washington, to be played by third-grade girl:
1) Walk across stage while fanning face with fold-out lace-paper fan. Drop glove in front of George. Blush with body language when George picks up glove and hands it back in a way that indicates they will fall in love. Walk must be natural but flirtatious, fast but not in a hurry, lighthearted but intentional.
2) Waist small enough to fit china-blue hoop-dress donated by Heather Nesbit's mother.
3) Hair long enough to be curled into ringlets and worn in low pigtails gathered at sides of face, in period style.
David Mellor never speaks a word, but lifts the dropped glove and hands it to her, looking at her in a way that she thinks about at night, in bed, listening to her mother pactice La Campanella on the piano, her father dictate his patient charts.

21. TODD WINSTON

She wears skirts and dresses to school. At recess Todd watches the girls do cherry drops from the monkey bars. *It's not Sunday,* he says. *It's not Tuesday.* She chooses the wrong days on purpose. If Saturday and Sunday are not clean, she has to think very hard about what day of the week it actually is.

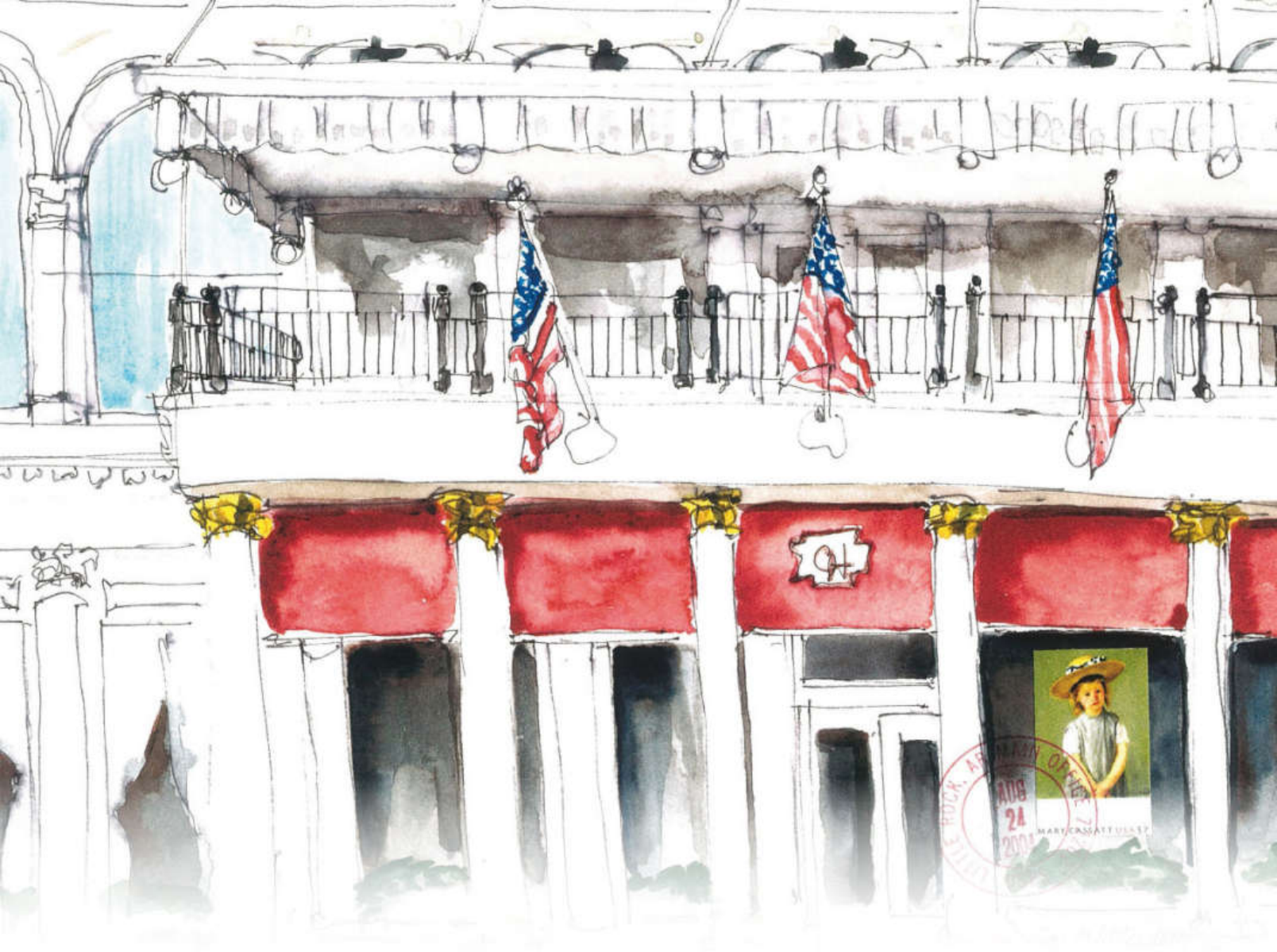
22. NEDDY HILL

The story as her mother tells it: *It was your 3rd birthday party, I put you in this darling little smocked dress with bric-a-brac on the collar and pockets, you know you looked adorable in green with that bright strawberry hair, and you were sitting on the floor picking tape off your presents, that's how you were back then, delicate, you hated to make a mess, in fact I remember once you didn't want to eat the cut-up pieces of chicken on your plate and instead of spitting them out or hiding them in a napkin you placed each piece in one of the seat-holes inside your Fisher-Price school bus—well in waltzes Neddy from next door—you remember the Hills, they moved to Canada—without a gift, hands in his pockets. He walks straight up to you and grabs the present and rips all the paper off. Then he plants a smacker right on your lips. Imagine the sass, only five years old.* This story is corroborated by a square picture, bordered in white, in which a girl with flat-paddle pigtails clamped into barrettes sits on the floor surrounded by presents, her face blocked by the back of Neddy's head, a dark mess of curls. Her first kiss was thus preserved on film. She cannot gauge her three-year-old reaction to Neddy Hill's older-man audacity, as nothing of her own face is visible, other than one cheek, palest-of-pale skin already dusted with freckles, skin that was, her mother would always say, a soft she'd never felt before, or since, not even in her other children, not just surface-smooth but soft all the way through, firm but yielding, quashy-thick, *otherworldly skin, when you were a baby I couldn't get enough of touching it.*

23. BOBBY BREMAN (Another Scene She Doesn't Remember)

I like Bobby. He is nice. He has freckles. He is taller than me.
Mother: Do you want him to be your boyfriend?
Yes.
Then ask him: Will you be my boyfriend?
(*No way, Jose.*)
She refuses to come inside the house after school. She crawls into the oleander bushes bordering the driveway and makes herself very small so that no one will see what she is, a Rejected Girl. Assume tears. Assume mother, a former kindergarten teacher, sits with her deep inside the bushes. Assume coaxing, delivered cookies. Homebaked, why not.
Daddy's doing rounds at the hospital, do you want to page him and ask him to be your boyfriend?
Yes.
Assume answer: Of course, darling daughter of mine. Of course.





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THE LEGEND OF CHOKOLOSKEE

SEARCHING FOR WATSON IN THE TEN THOUSAND ISLANDS

BY JOHN O'CONNOR

"Cypress Slough and Mist, Cypress Lodge, Punta Gorda, Florida," by Eliot Porter. Courtesy of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art

Back in a tangle of pepper trees, past the rusted skeleton of a Model S Ford, in the black muck and dead-air stink of an abandoned shell-mound island at the western edge of the Everglades, I'm hunting the bones of the outlaw Leslie Cox. For a long time rumor was that Cox, a surly, dark-haired drifter from up around Fort White, Florida, was hiding out here in the Ten Thousand Islands, prowling its knotted creeks and salt marsh bogs, and just might turn up on your porch one evening to settle old scores.

"Unless Watson killed him, which nobody believed, Cox was still there," Peter Matthiessen writes in *Shadow Country,* his fictional re-jiggering of this region's most hard-dying legend. Of course we're talking ages ago. Cox, even if he did live out his life in this wilderness, is long gone now.

But what I'd been hearing lately was that Cox died young, had in fact been murdered in 1910 some one hundred yards from where I'm kneeling, his body left to rot, and that his killer was none other than E. J. "Bloody" Watson, who was himself gunned down a few days later by a posse of his neighbors on Chokoloskee Island. If true, Cox's bones could still be stuck in this soft marl, poking up through the years to forever upend the Watson myth. Finding them might finally account for what happened on this unsettled ground a century ago.

So I'm down on my knees, peering into the darkness, scraping my way through snarled limbs of buttonwood and black mangrove, swatting at mosquitoes. But the foliage won't yield. It's too thick and ragged and cobwebbed, and there are too many goddamn bugs, not to mention short odds on venomous snakes—diamondbacks and corals and moccasins—and instead of boots I've stupidly worn New Balance sneakers, which are officially ruined. After maybe three minutes of searching, I come storming out of the brush, waving my arms in a mosquito cloud, and almost go down hollering in a tangle of ferns. Back at the boat, Capt. Gary McMillin waits, motor running.

"Find much?"

"Watson's car," I mumble. Because it's patently absurd on so many levels, I don't mention I've been looking for Cox's bones. Say I found something—and just positing that means my brain is awash in crime procedurals—but say I kicked loose some lost shard or fluted shaft, then what? Get it DNA tested? Scrounge up a Cox relative, if there are any, for cross-referencing? And what about the other bones buried out here, all those cane-cutters Watson allegedly killed, and before them the Calusa Indians done in by the Spanish? Cox's would be just one corpse in a jumbled necropolis and unearthing it would require a dedicated team of crime scene investigators. Besides, why would Watson leave that body behind when he knew it would've gotten him off the hook in Chokoloskee? None of it makes sense.

"Imagine living here with no skeeter repellent," Gary says through his short white beard, nodding to the clearing behind me where the redbrick remains of Watson's old plantation house bake in the sun next to his cistern and sugarcane kettle, a few paces from a National Park Service Porta-Potty. These ancient killing fields have been repurposed as an NPS campground and are part of the Wilderness Waterway, a ninety-nine-mile-long kayak trail that winds from Everglades City to the town of Flamingo, at the southern tip of the state.

On cue, mosquitoes make for our eardrums. As we shove off, the Watson Place gets quickly swallowed by jungle. In Watson's day, the Ten Thousand Islands were wild frontier inhabited by plume hunters and ex-cons and moonshiners and rough-hewn "Gladesmen" like Leslie Cox who lived off the land and beyond the law. Watson, Kurtz-like, carved a small empire from this desolate stump of mangrove at a narrow bend in the Chatham River. Gary and I agree it would make a sweet hideout, if you could stand the mosquitoes.

"You get a piece of history out here," Gary says, his voice straining over the engine growl. "You also get an idea of how people could go crazy being so isolated."

I'm the sole passenger on the "Bloody Watson" sightseeing tour, an expansive voyage through Watson iconography offered by the Smallwood Store on Chokoloskee, the borderlands town that's the doorstep to the Ten Thousand Islands. Watson lore has birthed a small tourism industry in these parts, thanks mostly to Matthiessen's 1990s trilogy *Killing Mr. Watson, Lost Man's River,* and *Bone by Bone,* which were condensed into a single nine-hundred-page volume, *Shadow Country: A New Rendering of the Watson Legend,* winner of the 2008 National Book Award. You can find the books at the tackle shop in nearby Everglades City, over at the Ranger Station, and at Smallwood's, a trading post-turned-museum run by Lynn Smallwood McMillin, Gary's wife and the granddaughter of C. S. "Ted" Smallwood, who was friendly with Watson. Until a couple of years ago, the museum staged dramatic reenactments of Watson's killing based on its depiction in *Shadow Country*—he was shot on the beach out back as he stepped off his boat—featuring descendants of the killers and a few of the original guns.

Inside, among shelves of ancient dry goods and cans of "TRAK Insect Surficide, 6% DDT," is a laminated pencil drawing of a dramatically whiskered Watson, next to an impressively succinct bio: "Bloody Ed Watson (1855–1910) . . . was a successful local cane farmer with a fearsome wild west history. In October 1910, a group of Chokoloskee men met him at the store dock and killed him. They were convinced that he was shooting his farm workers on payday and feeding them to the gators." There's a Ten Thousand Islands map with "Bodies Found" written across it in black Sharpie and arrows pointing to where some of his suspected victims were discovered. Gary's boat tour comprises most of these spots.

Matthiessen, who died last year at eighty-six, grew up hearing the Watson legend during summers in southwest Florida. It struck him, he said, as "a metaphor for the Florida frontier. It's all there, the racism, the corporate greed, the destruction of the environment, the isolation of the Indian peoples." He spent three decades collecting stories from surviving witnesses, combing public records, and badgering Watson's descendants to talk to him while attempting to pry a dead man loose from his afterlife. He knew a good story when he heard it: a mix of Conrad and Faulkner, Virgil and Dante, set in a pitiless landscape. It sustained Matthiessen for fifteen hundred blood-soaked pages (the length of his unwieldy first draft, conceived as a single novel), by far the most prodigious literary eruption of his career.

Something about the Ten Thousand Islands enchanted Matthiessen, too. It's clichéd but undeniable, the place engineers huge psychic boreholes. Storm clouds both literal and figura-

tive were bound to gather up like omens over homesteads hacked into the horizon, practically floating atop the black water.

Though fiction, the events of *Shadow Country* are more or less established fact on Chokoloskee. While a few might quibble with Matthiessen over particulars, they'd allow the overall veracity of his portrayal. Perhaps the book's nearest fictional coeval is Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang,* which recasts the real-life Australian bushranger Ned Kelly as a lovably misunderstood folk hero. But try to imagine that Carey's novel was also Kelly's official biography, written while the topic was still raw, and elevating it from the realm of myth to the historical record. There are Chokoloskeeans today who believe Watson was mostly innocent, or that his crimes, if you could call them that, were exaggerated, or at least their context—desperate land grabs in ungovernable wilderness during an era when blacks and Indians were murdered with industrial efficiency—should've gotten him a pass. To others, Watson plainly had it coming.

No doubt the "Bloody Watson" boat excursion constitutes murder-porn, an odd vein of pseudo-historical voyeurism as puzzling as it is shrewdly contrived. London has its Jack the Ripper "terror walk"; Corleone, Sicily, its "mafia tours." Despite the otherwise popular affection for bloodshed, I happen to be deeply invested in the tour, having read *Shadow Country* twice and pondered the Watson mythos to the point of panic. On a limbic level, Matthiessen's tale of entrepreneurial strivers casting lots in a forsaken backwater feels like a full-bore psychological Thunderdome. The novel is really about vengeance, that baseline response to perceived injustice that dwells within everyone and which we're lucky to keep at arm's length. I've come a long way to see this place, to reckon with a legend and landscape that wind me up tightly, hoping one might unlock something in the other. The fact is, Gary McMillin, swinging the tiller on a twenty-four-foot Carolina skiff, has captured my Muse.

"This here's all Watson country," he yells as we bounce toward a slash of white sand called Rabbit Key, where Watson's body was interred until the Fort Myers sheriff came to dig him up. Sixtyish and immensely built, with white-blond hair pinned to his head by a once-white sweatband, Gary stone-crabbed out of Chokoloskee for thirty-three years before quitting to help Lynn run the store. When we crunch onto a beach lumped with oyster shells, I catch a nostril-ful of tidal funk and think of Sheriff Tippins's exhumation morsel at the end of Book I: "Any man going ashore on Rabbit Key can get a whiff of Mr. Watson yet today."

Sitting there, Gary and I discuss some finer points of Watson's demise, starting with his arrival in the Ten Thousand Islands in the early 1890s: A deadeye shot in a black frockcoat with a break-top Smith & Wesson who was maybe wanted in Arkansas for the murder of the outlaw queen Belle Starr, Watson "looked and acted like our idea of a hero," as one resident puts it in *Shadow Country.* Notwithstanding his rusty Kilmister muttonchops, negligible lips, and beady blue eyes, Watson charmed the pants off the local gals, leaving a brood of blue-eyed gingers in his wake.

Then gossip started up about "Watson Payday," how he had a habit of killing his black farmhands instead of paying them. It was said he murdered some runaways on Lost Man's Key; a couple of game wardens; a crazy Frenchman; the hog-lover Green Waller and his woman Hannah Smith, the ex-con Dutchy Melville—all three of whom he gutted and dumped in the current; for a final tally of fifty-three victims, some innocent, some not-so, making Watson the second-most-prolific serial murderer in U.S. history after "Green River Killer" Gary Ridgway. These last murders he pinned on his foreman, Leslie Cox. Unsurprisingly, the Chokoloskee posse—you might also call them a lynch mob—didn't buy it. Watson wiggled out of that one, departing Smallwood's in his motorboat, *Warrior,* and promising to return with Cox dead or alive. The 1910 hurricane came and went. When Watson disembarked at Chokoloskee three days later with a likely story of how he'd shot Cox on Chatham Bend but had misplaced the cadaver, things got messy.

The upshot is the posse tried arresting him, Watson's gun misfired, and he was thoroughly showered with lead about fifty feet from his wife and children. Even "with all that lead in him, Ed Watson kept on coming . . . that was the demon in him. . . . He never crumpled but fell slow as a felled tree." The men hitched a rope to the body and towed it out to Rabbit Key, plunked it in a hole, covered it with slabs of worm coral torn loose by the hurricane, and called it a day. Thirty-three bullets were eventually plucked from Watson's mangled corpse, not counting buckshot.

Pretty much all of this is covered in *Shadow Country.* Except for the stuff about Cox's bones remaining out at Chatham Bend. In Book III, Watson's final reckoning with Cox is cut short by some Mikasuki Indians who have a serious ax to grind with the foreman. Matthiessen, in a sleight-of-hand that eschews a tidy comeuppance for Cox yet accounts for his disappearance, leaves his fate open-ended: "Somewhere in the backcountry of America, an old man known in other days as Leslie Cox might still squint in the sun, and spit, and revile his fate."

According to Lynn McMillin, plenty of folks wouldn't talk to Matthiessen when he came to Chokoloskee asking prickly questions, so he likely never heard the story of Cox's bones.

"People down here don't trust outsiders," Lynn had told me earlier that day, back at the Smallwood Store. "They felt like even after all this time there's things that're better left alone."

But Lynn hadn't heard the story of Cox's bones either. It seemed nobody had. Until one afternoon in 1993, three years after Matthiessen's first Watson installment came out, when an old man appeared at the store spinning a curious yarn.

"He was practically dead himself," Lynn recalled. "Ninety-four, ninety-five"—which would've made him about ten at the time of Watson's death—"he stood right there and said he and his daddy had gone down to Chatham Bend three days after Watson was killed and found Cox's body hung up in the mangroves." Leery of getting embroiled in the whole mess, they kept their mouths shut. "He said what many folks here suspected: Watson was telling the truth."

Lynn wouldn't say the man's name, only that he passed away years ago. She led me outside and under the store, which rose on pilings at the edge of Chokoloskee Bay, the beams clearing our heads by a half-foot. As Lynn shuffled along, a skein of fatigue clung to her. Just the day before, she'd been in Naples signing settlement papers in a lawsuit against Florida Georgia Grove, a developer that had wanted to build on the land next door, doing away with the only road leading to Smallwood's. The settlement preserved the road but did little to assuage Lynn's feelings about that timeless Florida scourge: developers.

Lynn wanted to show me the beach where Watson was gunned down. Tramping the developer's fence, we skirted a cement seawall, pausing at a spot of washed-out scrub.

"Right here's where he got it," she said. It smelled of freshly mowed grass, matted seagrape, saltwater. Bits of Styrofoam were tossed about, some fishing line, the cap to a Penn ten-

nis ball container. Lynn was raised amid bogeyman tales of Watson's misdeeds. Tales passed around the dinner table often acquired a new twist. But her late aunt Thelma, who witnessed the shooting as a six-year-old, recounted it exactly as Matthiessen does in *Shadow Country,* from *Warrior*'s steady *put-put-putting* up the coast to the hard scrape of the hull as Watson grounded it at Smallwood's to his acrobatic dismount in front of the Chokoloskee posse: "Timed his move forward as she went aground and jumped as the bow struck, holding his shotgun up across his chest and twisting in the air so's to land where he could cover the whole crowd," Matthiessen writes.

We headed back.

"There's other things that aren't in the books," Lynn said. "Like the reasons why they killed him in the first place. Matthiessen didn't get that story either."

A thin cast of twilight was rising in the west as we climbed the steps into the store. Across the water, an osprey banked and dipped over the tree line.

"Watson was a serial womanizer," Lynn said. "That's why they killed him. He had deflowered several women and had illegitimate children all over the islands. The families got tired of his crap."

This had a hard-bitten ring of truth. Actually, Matthiessen hints at it early in *Shadow Country*: "[H]is mannerly ways was fatal to women all the time we knew him." Despite the gossip about "Watson Payday" and his infernal backcountry dealings, there was little evidence he'd ever killed anyone (except for Belle Starr—more on that later), and some in that posse may have been personally motivated. Of course, anger isn't so easily distilled, even in revenge. After the hurricane, everyone was riled. Some men might've simply been sick of feeling afraid, while others were led by their neighbors. As in many small, isolated places where feuds escalate and turn violent, things happen that are beyond anyone's understanding. In the moment, it can be hard to know whether you're doing someone else's bidding.

Whatever their reasons, it's easy to sympathize with those men, who weren't bad men, most of them, and who must've metabolized Watson's presence in their community as a parasite sucking the life-force from the host organism, which, in the absence of law enforcement, they felt obliged to purge by themselves.

"Some of the things Watson did were justified," Lynn told me. "It was a lawless area. But those men thought it was their job to get rid of him. And they did."

If I heard her right, the line Watson walked between life and death had an uncanny logic to it. His killers simply deduced its ending. You also have to feel for Matthiessen. An existential masochism attends entrenchment in the Watson legend. The constant toggling between fact and fiction, between what's been said and what hasn't, by whom and to what ends, produces a distancing effect that funnels you down paths that gradually disappear. No matter which you choose—say, one out on Chatham Bend leading to Leslie Cox's bones—Watson comes back as motley and chewed up as ever. In 1999, Matthiessen told Charlie Rose that his version of Watson "is what I intuit, because there's so few hard facts" and "the legends about this man are so numerous and mostly all wrong." It's tempting to see in Matthiessen a shadow of Watson's son Lucius, who undertakes a painful reconstruction of his father's murder in Book



II amidst enduring rancor and misdirection on Chokoloskee: "Just when he thought he was getting things sorted out, local rumor had turned things murky yet again." Or as Gary puts it during our ride through the hellishly coiled backcountry, where rivers and creeks and inlets sprout ancillary fingers that twist and drown in an ocean of mangrove, "It makes you want to go in a thousand directions at once."

* * *

About noon the next day I set out from Chokoloskee in a kayak borrowed from Lynn McMillin. I bring my fly-rod and cast around for snook and redfish. I'd wanted to paddle out to Rabbit Key and camp where Watson's body had lain. But a small-craft advisory called for heavy chop that far offshore. A ranger at the NPS station, where I stopped for a camping permit, openly challenged my backcountry gravitas, clucking at my dry sack—too small for a tent but just right for a can of Pringles and four tallboys of Coors Light—telling me, in so many words, that were I to get stuck out there they wouldn't be inclined to come fetch me.

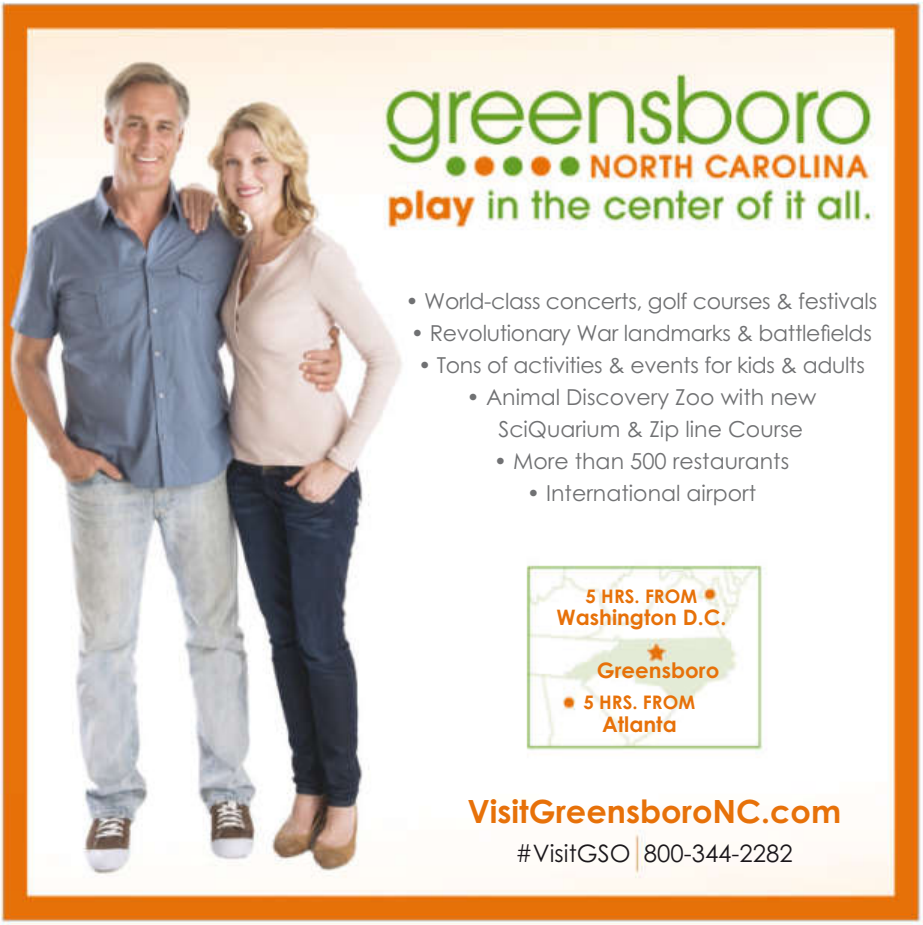
Instead I strike a northwest tangent across the bay, casting as I go. The sky is the color of a Blue Colada, icy and blinding. A pair of bottlenose dolphins rise ahead of me, their dorsal fins breaking the surface in tandem as they drive mullet against an oyster bar. An ibis strolls out of the shadows, a blur of ivory with ink-dipped wingtips; "Chokoloskee chicken" were once slaughtered by the tens of thousands in the Everglades, their plumes sold for women's hats, their meat salted and shipped to Cuba. Watson hunted them in droves. As did his neighbors. Until there were hardly any left. A vein of destruction runs through *Shadow Country,* of nature mutilated and eroded by man, of man's own tireless capacity to cloak himself in suffering.

At Sandfly Pass the wind picks up and blows my line in my face, so I head back across the bay toward the shelter of the Turner River. At the river mouth I shake my copy of *Shadow Country* from my dry sack and flip to a gory early scene recounted by Bill House, who would later become one of Watson's executioners: "Every alligator in the Glades was piled up in the last water holes, and one day out plume hunting, I come on a whole heap of 'em near the head of Turner River . . . Me'n Ted [Smallwood] and a couple others, we took forty-five hundred gators in three weeks . . . They was packed so close we didn't waste no bullets, we used axes."

Thankfully the gator trade has dried up in the Islands, which today lie mostly within the Everglades National Park, a federally protected reserve of 1.5 million acres. As a symbol of man's sprawling stupidity and waste, followed by his eleventh-hour attempts to undo monumental ecological disaster, it doesn't get much grander than the Glades. Before it was dredged and dynamited and sub-divisioned nearly to oblivion, the Everglades measured five times its current size, part of an eleven-thousand-square-mile watershed stretching from just south of Orlando all the way to Florida Bay. Although it contains swampland, the Glades are technically a river, as wide as sixty miles in places, flowing at the rate of about a quarter mile per day. Starting in the 1920s, the Army Corps of Engineers tried to drain most of it into the ocean, building hundreds of miles of canals and dikes and pump stations in what was essentially a massive real estate scam to protect land for corporations like Alcoa and U.S. Sugar. Half of the Everglades wetlands was destroyed, more than 90 percent of its wading birds and alligators killed. By the time Harry Truman signed the park into law in 1947, the wood stork, American crocodile, Florida panther, manatee, and snail kite—a small hawk with sherbet-orange talons and a predilection for aquatic apple snails—were almost gone, as were native cypress and black mangrove. Then on the eve of the 2000 Bush-Gore debacle, Congress passed a $7.8 billion last-ditch plan to save the Glades, which, if it ever gets its legs, will be the largest environmental restoration project in history.

* * *

And yet you don't sense any ruin where I'm paddling. It feels wild, primeval. Turner River's gators have retreated east with the freshwater into the sawgrass. I head up the Lopez River, just off to the south, passing through a long corridor of mangrove and hammocks of buttonwood and gumbo-limbo, beneath airplants as big as my torso. The whole package feels vapor-shrouded and motionless, like a greenhouse into which the light is beating straight in.



For the next few hours nothing much happens. The water turns from blue-black to macchiato to bottle-green and back again. I cast to all the spots that look promising. Zilch. My arms get sore from casting. I snag my line on a piling, break off, and stew over that for several minutes before retying.

Big expectations in fly-fishing tend to unravel spectacularly. You do everything right, kill yourself on prep work and logistical heavy lifting, get on the water at the right hour with the right flies and plug away till your hands turn pink and neurons dribble from your nostrils . . . and the fish give you the middle finger. But I'm content to drift along, trying not to judge myself too harshly. I love this lonely place, its fitful silences, its refusal to bend to one's wants.

Thirty years before *Shadow Country,* Matthiessen won another National Book Award for a nonfiction work, *The Snow Leopard,* about his expedition to the Himalayas in search of the elusive predator of its title. (He's the only writer to win in both fiction and non-.) For all its metaphoric mining of natural phenomena, *The Snow Leopard* couldn't differ more from *Shadow Country.* As spiritual autobiography, it's a quiet book, too quiet for my tastes, albeit with many dazzling passages, but almost totally devoid of drama. I can think of only two instances where the tempo shifts up a gear ever so slightly before returning to its unearthly quiet. But the books share a minor chord. *The Snow Leopard,* like *Shadow Country,* is preoccupied with the loss of a father. Prior to the expedition, Matthiessen's wife, Deborah Love, died of cancer, and he abandons their eight-year-old son, Alex, to undertake the months-long trip, something that eats at Matthiessen throughout.

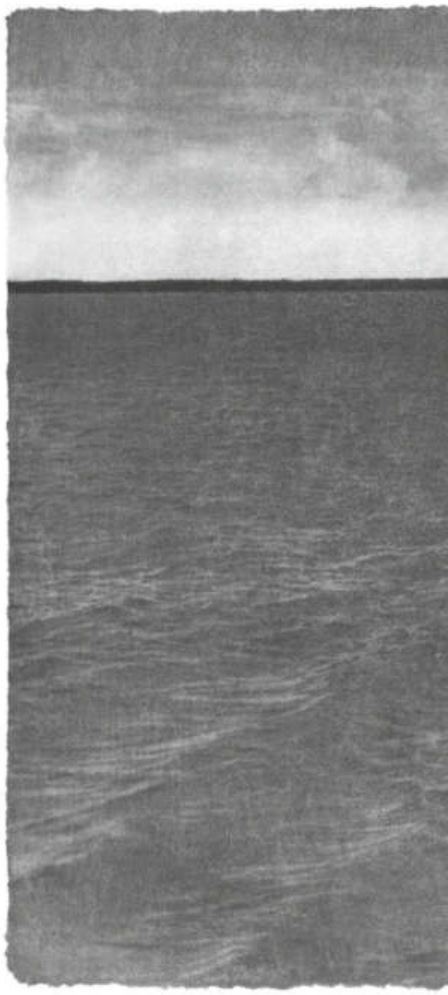
It's less oblique in *Shadow Country.* Book II unwinds as a long rumination on what a murderer bequeaths to his sons: Lucius Watson, driven nuts by his father's death, torpedoes his own life in a fruitless search for the truth. His half-brother, Rob, has it worse off; you sense early on he's chasing his father into the ground. Their bewilderment is understandable. In some ways, Ed Watson wasn't so different from countless other white men in frontier America. Given another fifty years, he might've been a prosperous Fort Myers developer with a two-car garage and fixed-rate mortgage, a marvel with a nine iron, goading his boys into backyard slap-fights. Instead he became a hideously deranged killer (as Matthiessen tells it in Book III, Watson's own father was a vicious drunk who tormented the boy throughout his childhood). The fatherless sons, Rob and Lucius, emerge as two poles of Watson's conscience, circling each other, trying to make sense of their legacies.

Their losses don't compare to Henry Short's, for my money the saddest character in the whole Watson trilogy. Another outcast ditched by his father, Henry, a black man, has the additional misfortune of being quick with a rifle. Forced by his white benefactors to join the Chokoloskee posse, he plays a pivotal role in Watson's death, an act for which he's later repaid by being driven from town toward a gruesome end, purely from the meanness of white folks. This is another preoccupation of Matthiessen's: the void between white and black, the rich and powerless, that has defined our continent. While Henry has white friends, they don't quite care enough to save him. Just like nobody cared much when Watson was supposedly butchering black cane-cutters. Offing white people is what got Watson killed. Black lives were erasable.

The kayak has been murdering my back all day. The seat is made of knives, broken glass, railroad spikes. By six o'clock, still fish-less, I'm a slab of dead nerves from mid-thigh to my twelfth vertebra. Mosquitoes charge onto the river. I've forgotten to bring bug repellant and have to stop casting to slap my neck and ears. I've had enough. Un-scrolling my laminated nautical chart, I try to fix my position. Is that east or west? Is the tide coming in or going out? Swiveling my head around, the entire horizon appears warped and twined in mangrove. A single thought comes to mind: Uh-oh.

Nobody knows for sure whether there are actually 10,000 islands in the Ten Thousand Islands. It's impossible to keep track. Old ones get washed away and new ones appear where there hadn't been any before. Rabbit Key is a third the size it was a generation ago and will shortly vanish, its red mangroves carried off by the tides. Others, like the Watson Place, are sturdier shell middens built by Calusa Indians before they were exterminated by the Spanish, though these too are slowly vanishing. My chart puts it as such: "Area subject to constant change."

It gets dark out. I can't see much. The kayak pitches diagonally across the waves, water splashing into the cockpit and soaking my shorts. I notice I'm merely being pulled along by the tide, so I rest my arms, hoping for the best. A motor churns faintly somewhere ahead. Rounding a bend, Chokoloskee suddenly appears as a few scattered lights in the distance. Slogging through the foam, I thank the night stars.



* * *

In the morning I call a number Lynn gave me. A man answers, says his name is Alvin Lederer. Says he's the official spokesman for Watson's kin. Says don't bother, they won't talk to you. Says he keeps a photograph in his wallet of Ed Watson instead of his parents. Says he has spent twenty-five years researching Watson and knows a thing or two, like the identity of a man whose father found Leslie Cox's body on Chatham Bend back in 1910.

"Name was Ed Smith," he says. "I knew him when he was seventy. He told me that after the hurricane his father had come across Leslie Cox's body with a bullet hole in his head. He was hung up in the mangroves. His father said not to tell anyone." Alvin lets this sink in. "Ed Watson killed Leslie Cox just like he said. Had him in his boat. Shot him in the head and he fell overboard, then his body washed ashore."

Alvin, it becomes clear, runs a kind of one-man Watson Innocence Project, contesting Watson's guilt for anyone who'll listen. Although he has never been to Chatham Bend nor seen



the river country where Leslie Cox roamed, he has iron springs from Watson's bed and shards of glass from his windows. He knows Watson's great-granddaughter, Edith, he says, who lives nearby and "has a head of red hair like E. J. Watson." His tone is exasperated, not curt, but lawyerly, like he's dead tired of explaining to folks what is self-evident, and he tends to punctuate sentences with a declarative "Yessir."

"There's no proof that Watson killed fifty-three people," he says. "I have documentation! Yessir."

What about Belle Starr? I ask.

"Oh without a doubt he killed her. I have here a copy of the warrant for Watson's arrest. But he was blamed for other murders he didn't commit."

Alvin says Belle Starr—a known associate of the James and Younger gangs—had blood on her hands, and anyways Watson was acquitted of her murder. We split hairs over other Watsonian minutiae: why he didn't light out for Key West knowing the Chokoloskee posse was waiting; whether his shotgun was even loaded; what Cox must've been thinking when Watson came for him; and who fired the first shot at Smallwood's.

"Henry Short was the one who killed Watson," Alvin says, spelling out what Matthiessen cleverly obscures. "He shot him straight through the chest. Then everybody else shot him because they all liked Henry and you can't have a black man shooting a white guy in 1910. He would've been lynched. They couldn't say anything afterwards because they're all accessories. Yessir."

I read Alvin a quote from *Shadow Country* where Erskine Thompson qualifies Watson's guilt: "With so many stories growed up around that feller, who is to say which ones was true?" But Alvin is decidedly untroubled by the prospect of parsing fact from legend, of detangling a fictional wormball that has morphed into history. His research, he says, suggests plumb lines of delineation.

"I'm the only person to study Watson as much as Matthiessen," he says. "His first book is ninety-nine percent true. The other two aren't worth the paper they're written on."

I ask him what he means. "Nobody objected to *Shadow Country* when it came out. But it's Peter's version of E. J. Watson. I've spent years trying to prove him wrong."

But Matthiessen never claimed to be telling a true story, I say. That's why he called it a novel. While I sympathize with Alvin's intense literalism, the notion that Matthiessen got anything wrong seems preposterous, like arguing that Tolstoy flubbed his portrait of Napoleon by failing to mention he was terrified of cats. Alvin swats this away. What vexes him to no end are the false assumptions about Watson he says Matthiessen's books promote, even as fiction.

"I know Watson was innocent," he says. "He played with his reputation because it was beneficial to him in the Ten Thousand Islands, but he was no serial killer."

Alvin starts spitballing. "I talked to a man whose father played fiddle at the Watson Place. He said everybody got along. Nobody ever talked about Watson killing anyone . . . Watson hired drifters to harvest his cane, kept 'em in alcohol and tobacco. In the end they owed him more money than he owed them, so they left quietly . . . It's fascinating, in all my years

"Everglades 14," archival pigment print (2014). © Jungjin Lee 2015

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of research, I've never found any evidence of murder. Actually, I found out a lot of good things about E. J. Watson. Yessir."

He tells me to Google a book called *The Singing and the Gold,* another take on the Watson legend by an "A. B. Matthiessen," a pen name for its husband and wife co-authors. From what I can tell, it's a lurid Fifties potboiler—"Maybe Ed Watson was too big for the Ten Thousand Islands, *but too little to be a man,*" that sort of thing—written by Barbara Heggie Matthiessen and A. W. Matthiessen. I turn up an article in which Peter Matthiessen disavows any connection to *The Singing and the Gold* or its authors: "No relation and I never read the book. I was hoping no one would find out about it. It makes for a gossipy type of item. I'd rather people focus on the merits of [my] book itself."

"I asked Peter if he was related to them," Alvin says. "He said no. I just find that hard to believe."

It's an odd coincidence, I confess. But what am I missing? At worse, Matthiessen got the idea for his trilogy from people to whom he might've been related. Alvin sniffs something more nefarious at hand.

"Peter was a liar," he says. "He was in the CIA and lied about it."

In 2008, Matthiessen did admit to having worked for the Central Intelligence Agency in the early 1950s and founding the *Paris Review* as his cover, which he hid from the magazine's co-founders.

"You think he lied about being related to those other Matthiessens?" I ask.

"Look, personally, I liked Peter. But in the CIA you have to be able to lie."

Before we hang up, Alvin says he'll email me some Watson stuff that'll blow my mind. I get a bunch of emails from him. No text. Just blurry photos of Watson's house in its prime, of a puffy Watson in a sharp black suit and flowing whiskers. There's an arrest warrant for an "Edgar A. Watson" issued on Feb. 8, 1889, by the U.S. Court Western District of Arkansas for the murder of Belle Starr, along with a *New York Times* article from the next day:

> 'Bill' Starr, husband of the notorious female outlaw who was assassinated near Eufaula, Indian Territory, arrived here this morning with Edgar Watson in custody. He charges Watson with the murder. Watson is a white man, and came from Florida a year ago. The murder occurred near his farm, and Starr claims that the trail from the scene of the crime led to Watson's house and was made by Watson's boots. The prisoner was placed in jail.

There's also a bizarre piece from the *Atlanta Constitution* written not long after Watson landed in the Ten Thousand Islands:

> Captain E. J. Watson . . . tells a remarkable story about his farm. He says that centuries ago when the Spaniards invaded Florida they found a tribe of Indians in the southern portion of the state who were gigantic in size and fierce of temper. The story goes that these Indians were driven back to Chatham river by the Spaniards and there the aborigines made their last stand. The tribe was caught, like rats in a trap, in a bend of the river and was exterminated.
>
> "Signs of that desperate battle are everywhere visible now," said Captain Watson. "My farm is literally covered with huge skulls and bones, the ground being so rich from the decayed bodies that I grow phenomenal crops. The bones show these Indians to have been nearly eight feet in height, broad of shoulder and mighty of arm. The remains are scattered over the ground, singly and in groups; some are intact, while others are crushed as by blows of mighty battle ax or mace.

I find more photographs on Alvin's Facebook page, including one of Henry Short. He's sitting on a stack of crates at Smallwood's, slouched in the sun with a foot up and a hand raised, perhaps scratching his head. Far more than the image of Watson, it's jarring seeing Henry—who met such an awful end in *Shadow Country*—transmuted in this way, rising and climbing into the present. I can't help thinking of Roland Barthes's line about photography's kaleidoscopic twist of time and mortality: "He is dead, and he is going to die." In that instant, Henry could be waiting on his woman, or resting his eyes in the fierce light, or nursing a hangover. The sight of him feels like a remembered dream, or a narcotic intrusion on reality.

* * *

On my last day on Chokoloskee I drive over to Outdoor Resorts, an RV park and marina at the island's north end. The streets are bare. Brown pelicans cast baleful looks at a few Chris-Crafts and Sea Rays headed out with the tide. Just eight miles from tourist-choked I-41, the town has a shipwrecked feel to it. The year-round population is pushing four hundred, the economy based entirely outdoors. There are airboat tours and bird-watching tours and "swamp-buggy" tours. Fishing khaki and University of Florida Gators apparel are the prevailing aesthetic. Most people seem like they just returned from fishing, or like they're about to go fishing, or are planning when they're next going fishing.

It wasn't always this quiet. Back in the 1980s, when Everglades waters were permanently closed to commercial boats, scores of local shrimp and mullet-men and stone-crabbers turned to marijuana smuggling, some running as far as Colombia for shipments, others unloading bales from mother ships out in the Gulf, then like the gator poachers and rumrunners of old, eluding law enforcement by plunging into the Ten Thousand Islands. An enterprising man could make $20,000 a night. Fancy new cars popped up in town. Before you knew it, there were bar brawls, a pistol-whipping. When federal agents descended, many of the adult males in Chokoloskee and Everglades City—some one hundred men—were arrested, including nearly the entire stone-crab fleet. Folks say there's still money hidden back in those mangroves.

At Outdoor Resorts I shake hands with Kenny Brown. Garrulous and deeply tanned, in jeans and a white guayabera, Kenny is a connoisseur of Watson lore, his reach rivaling Alvin's. Kenny's great-grandfather, Willie Brown, is mentioned in *Shadow Country,* and his grandfather, William Brown, witnessed Watson's killing as a boy. Kenny recalls Matthiessen visiting William on and off through the years to talk about Watson.

"Grandaddy Brown was the only guy still living that was there when it happened," Kenny says. "He saw it all go down. He's the one who told Matthiessen half of what's in his book, told him about the black frock coat Watson wore and the pistol he carried, said Watson toted it in a shoulder harness but couldn't get to it when his shotgun misfired."

I ask Kenny if his grandfather knew what became of Leslie Cox.

"Grandaddy Brown said Cox was in the lookout at the Watson Place when Watson come for him. I guess he assumed something wasn't quite right and he started running back through the woods. It's likely Watson tried to

talk to him and Cox raised his gun, and that was the end of him. Local fellas found the body about a hundred yards back on Chatham Bend. They were scared to turn it in."

"Did your grandfather tell Matthiessen that story?"

"I don't know. If he did, Matthiessen was smart enough to leave some mystery in the books, keep people guessing, you know?" It's that mystery, I finally realize, which I've attempted to spoil.

Kenny pulls out a paperback of *The Singing and the Gold* and lays it on the counter. "What do you make of that?" he says.

The cover shows Watson at the edge of a jungle, his face in shadow, looming over a slender woman in a low-cut white dress, golden locks kissing bare shoulders. It's "Emmanuelle in Chokoloskee."

"I wouldn't want to make Peter look bad," Kenny says. "But I bet you A.B. was his daddy. Matthiessen's family had a house in Sanibel over in Lee County, which is how Peter heard about Watson in the first place. It'd make sense."

We chew on this.

"Or maybe he just didn't want people knowing his story had already been wrote," Kenny says. "The truth is, folks here knew the Watson legend well ahead of Peter Matthiessen, or A. B. Matthiessen for that matter. Long as that building is standing over there"—he points towards Smallwood's—"and people like us keep the legend going, it's gonna stick. We have other stories, but this is the best."

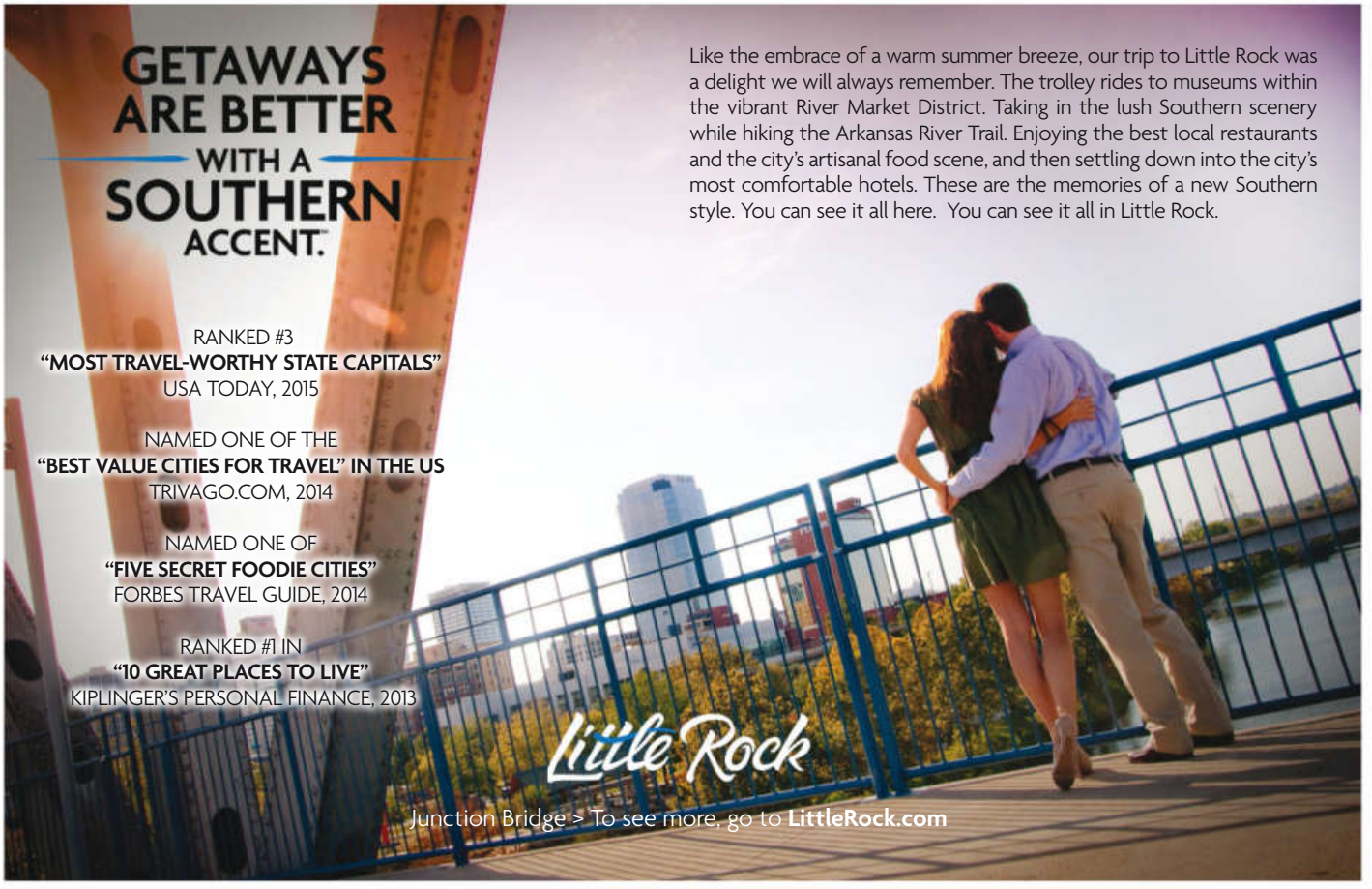
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Curious about the Henry Short photograph, I call Alvin back a few weeks later. He's fuming about "Florida crackers," having received some threatening Facebook messages from people who don't appreciate his Watson research, which he posts on Florida history blogs. As a Yankee transplant to Ocala, Alvin says he has never been trusted by Chokoloskeeans.

"They said if you come down to Chok we're gonna kick your ass," he says. "Now I know how Watson felt. Thirty people supposedly shot him. You couldn't get thirty people in Chokoloskee together in a boat. They'd all kill each other. They're like crabs in a bucket. One of 'em starts to climb out, the others pull 'em back down."

I mention the Henry Short photo, how surprising it is considering all that befell him, how it seems to communicate something about the Watson legend I can't put my finger on, something heartbreaking about the bottomless strands of racism and cruelty scrawled across our past. Alvin stops me. That may be so, he says, but actually Henry Short remained in Chokoloskee for years after Watson's death, married and made a living fishing up and down the coast, then moved up near Immokalee, where he lived to a ripe old age, died a beloved elder of his community. Lucius, too, lived peacefully in the Chok Bay Country, got along fine with his neighbors, and without any badness over the Watson stuff. He died in 1970 at age eighty-one and was buried in the family plot in Fort Myers a few feet from his daddy, Edgar J. Watson.

"There's several sides to this coin," Alvin says. "Yessir." We leave it at that.





The barn-studio where Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* took shape

Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and Educational Center

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U R H E C K B O X

a story by

Catherine Lacey

It had become such a horrible, lonely place, she said. And the wind! She swore the wind was worse than she'd ever remembered and the light just wasn't as *yellow* as it used to be and it seemed that even the people had turned rude and gas prices kept rising. Anyway, she was tired of driving and she wasn't partial to the new preacher at church, so there wasn't much keeping my mother in Texas.

Maybe, she said in a way that meant certainly, *it's time for me to move to New York.*

It was nearly midnight when she'd called. It had only been six months since everything. I put on my glasses and sat up in bed as if that would help me see the situation more clearly.

What about Maude and Jackie?

You know, I don't think Maude ever cared for me too much, her tone hovering between happiness and shame. *She never lets me take care of Jackie, not even now, when you think she'd at least have some sympathy—but she still always takes them to Lisa and Bill, all the time with Lisa and Bill. You know, I think she resents me for being single by choice. And that's really another thing, you know. You can't do anything in this damn town without someone looking down on it. Not a thing. You know what? I actually hate it here. I never thought I'd say that, but I do. I hate it. They're all conservative, self-righteous*—and she stammered here as if looking for the right mix of obscenity and politeness—*well, blowhards, that's what.*

She made no secret of being upset, and I didn't know how to react to her plain-laid feelings. Prior to this call she had mostly managed to avoid or dull any colorful emotions, her mood remaining placid and beige.

(The only exception was The Christmas Fight (as I referred to it privately

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(it wasn't even really a fight)) which happened two years earlier when I used the word *home* in reference to my apartment in Brooklyn instead of the house in White Deer where she'd raised us. *So that's it?* she asked, in her usual over-pleasant tone. *One year away and you don't even call this your home anymore?* She was aggressively frosting the annual spread of inedible gingerbread men (*They're decorative,* she always explained) and though I'd actually been in New York almost three years, not just one, I didn't correct her because her voice had amped to an oddly happy scream—*you were born and baptized here, lived twenty-six years here, have a brother and baby niece and sister-in-law and mother here, but now you think your home is some place you hardly even know—well, if that isn't the biggest insult you could ever say to your own flesh and blood*—and in a way, I could see her point. A few years, my name on an electric bill—it didn't really mean anything. (Then again, I'd never belonged in Texas either—I'd lacked the accent and felt uneasy about how far away the horizon was. Maybe it was the belief that I could be anything in New York, even my boring self, that made me feel so at home there. (But even that was just a theory. (I don't know why I feel so welcome in such an unwelcoming place.))) Raeford was watching a game on TV, one arm around Maude and the other resting a beer on baby Jackie while she slept in his lap. He glanced at the kitchen, but ultimately gave us the privacy of his ambivalence. *Everyone you know is here,* Mom yelled. *Anything you could do is here! If only you would have seen that and settled down with Daniel*—and though I never drank beer I got one, hinged off the cap, and had it rolling down my throat before the refrigerator could shut. I hadn't been raised for confrontation. She hadn't taught me how to do this. I took a long slug of beer and hoped she'd just go back to being herself, a former Miss Neshoba County who never let anyone forget she was voted *Most Amenable* for both junior and senior year of her high school superlatives (though I thought she must have meant *Most Amiable* (but it was probably true either way (and I wasn't going to be the one to correct her after all these years))). *But you just had to run off to New York to do God knows what and really, any woman would be lucky to settle down with Daniel*—(and if she'd been braver or meaner or just more honest she could have said, *especially you*) but it was then she seemed to realize how unlike herself she was being (how un-amiable, un-amenable) so she stopped yelling and nobody said a word until the dinner blessing. (*Amen.*) She never brought up Daniel again, but it didn't really matter. I'd already made it a habit to consider the way my life could have been if I'd said yes when Daniel had asked the question I knew he didn't even think was a question, just a rite of passage we had to go through. (You could see a marriage approach some couples in Texas the same way you could watch a summer storm churning on the plains, miles before it hit.) It was possible my life wouldn't have been any more or less enjoyable had I turned from person to wife, wife to parent, had I stayed in White Deer and parceled my hours out to a family, turned my mother grand. (A life might comfortably disappear into a well-worn groove between house, school, and grocery store. (All lives disappear in one way or another. (All hours get spent.))) But as pleasant as it might have been, that kind of life also seemed—somehow—elsewhere, like a dream I could only watch instead of do. We were all surprised Raeford was the first to end up with the spouse, baby, mortgage—*Man alive, I would've sworn I'd be the one to get out,* he said during his only stay with me in the city. *And don't you fuckin' tell Maude or Ma I was dipping,* he said, with a lisp from the chew, *you hear?* And of course I couldn't have ruined his image even if I'd wanted to. Raeford's turn from fuck-up to golden boy began, in his usual way, with an accident. When Maude told him she was *just a little pregnant,* some kind of man sprung up in him dismissing the ex-quarterback who had been coasting on charm and Coors Light through community college. Ma never again mentioned his long-ish hair, older-than-God Carhartts, or infrequent church attendance. Instead she cooed about her soon-to-be grandbaby and sent me meaningful glances. It was then, at the dinner table after they told us about the shotgun marriage, that I decided and quickly announced I was moving to New York. (I guess I'd been guided by our unspoken sibling law of equal-but-opposite reactions: When I made mud pies in the yard, he played Nintendo. I went to church and he drank by the river. He grew a family; I fled.) *Wooo doggie,* Rae said in that elevated monotone he used to express both enthusiasm and disdain, *city slicker. Big city gal.* Mom teared up, excused herself to slice the yellow cake, then let the TV drown out conversation for the rest of the night. *It's just . . . so much,* she said as she shut her bedroom door, and she didn't say another word about my leaving for years (not until The Christmas Fight, or non-fight). The next week we went to the courthouse with Maude and Rae like we were paying off a parking ticket. Maude's parents brought their own copy of the Bible and Mom threw birdseed at the newlyweds as they walked to his Chevy. Right before Rae dropped Mom and me off at her house, he slapped Maude's back and said *Wooo doggie, got myself a wifey,* in his usual way, but Rae doesn't say anything like that anymore and he doesn't slap anyone's back anymore because he doesn't say anything or slap anything because he doesn't exist and this, I knew, was the real reason Mom now hated everything in Texas.)

It was June 26. Six months to the day.

You can't move here, I told her. *Everyone you know is in Texas.*

Well, look who's talking.

* * *

Mother's move to New York was just the latest of several problems I had that summer. By then there were Rebecca's parrots, the Appropriate Behavior Rubrics at work, the increasing hostility of my downstairs neighbor, and the small, strange problem of Maurice.

Maurice's problem had something to do with integrity or honesty or setting something right, but I never understood how any of it had anything to do with me to begin with. Actually, I don't know what Maurice's problem was, but now that I think of it, his problems were probably bigger than all that. His deafness, for one, seemed problematic, as did his reading and writing skills. Let's just say, for simplicity, that Maurice's problem was me.

Rebecca told me it was best to keep busy in times of grief and that's what I was doing when I met Maurice. There had been a late January warm snap and all of Park Slope had flocked into Prospect: coatless, delirious on their picnics, pale limbs exposed, hyper children sprinting over yellowed hills. I had several hours of science podcasts to keep me company on a walk, so I played them one after the other, filling up my head, making no room for awful thoughts. I was walking through a wooded path when this guy, Maurice, ran up beside me. He wore a backwards cap and oversized jersey and motioned for me to take out my earphones. (There was a direness to his face, I thought, or maybe it was just that jagged scar that formed a C from forehead to chin. The fear that he might attempt to rape, kidnap, mug, or torment me rose up as a reminder that I

was still an anxious white woman from Texas, full of inherited racial and social prejudice and the defeated expectation that too many men are packed to their necks with a writhing violence. (A more evolved part of myself dismissed that thought (or maybe I just rationalized my fears away when I noticed this man's unintimidating build and remembered the statistical unlikelihood of a violent crime taking place in a crowded daytime park (or maybe it was just the heedlessness I'd felt since Rae died, that persistent desire I had to move toward life's chaos before it could surprise me))).)

I took my earphones out but he said nothing so I said, *What do you want?* in a not terribly kind way. Whatever he had to say or do—I could take it.

He pointed down the trail behind us, then at me, then at my shorts' pocket, back down the trail, then back at my shorts. His desperate eyes locked on mine.

I don't know what you want, I said. He made some indecipherable sounds, all vowel and V, then more vague hand gestures. It seemed he was deaf or pretending to be deaf or at least unable to speak, enduring some kind of mental handicap. I shrugged and started to put my headphones back in but he shook his head, pointed down the trail. I wondered if several able-bodied men could be waiting for this harmless-seeming bait to lure me in. I started to walk away, but he got out a flip phone, typed something, and showed it to me.

it feel, the screen said.

It feel? I asked.

He squinted at me, then at the words, hesitantly correcting them: *it fell*

Immediately, I knew there had been an accident. (In the last month I'd been avalanched by them: A woman had fallen down the stairs in my building, snapped her neck, and died by the recycling bins. A neighborhood boy had been smashed under a truck delivering apples. A distant cousin, Mom said, had stepped on an unseen crack in a frozen lake, then Rae, then a neighbor left a sticky note on my door asking if I could water her plants while she sat shiva for her mother. *it fell* fit into this world—everything was falling. Maybe an old lady had broken her hip, maybe his mother or grandmother, and he needed me to call for help since he couldn't speak.)

Someone's hurt?

He nodded and typed something else on the screen.

ur heck box

I went at the words like a riddle: My heck box? You are heck box? Heck box. What did it sound like—hegbogs? Hecho? Maybe the H was silent? Eck? Egg? Egg box. Egg carton?

I gave up and followed him down the trail. A white guy jogged past, his gait wobbling as he took in our unlikely pair. I felt embarrassed to see him noticing us and even more embarrassed that I tried to signal, in a look, that everything was fine. Still—I was following a stranger for an unknown reason. I couldn't decide if I was being gullible, over-trusting, or something else entirely.

After several yards Maurice jerked still and looked at the ground, peered into a bush, and looked both ways down the trail. Another white jogger went by, gave us a look. Maurice exhaled hard and met my eyes. I wondered if I could go now with a clear conscience that there was no one to save, that nothing had fallen. He grunted and pointed at me, then mimed putting headphones in while walking in place, gazing up at the trees with an expression of despondent terror. (I believed this was an imitation of me.) He pointed to his hip pocket, then the ground, then looked at me like, *See?*

But I didn't see. Maybe all the white ladies in the park looked the same and he had mixed me up with someone else. (A woman walked by us in clothes nearly identical to mine as if to confirm this (yellow-y white sneakers, jean shorts, and time-paled shirt (one meant to look borrowed from a man (but had, like mine, been bought))).) Maurice kept looking hard at me. There was something plastic-y about his face, something unbelievable about it. Wide forehead, bushy eyebrows, and an oddly small mouth—more like a caricature than a real person.

mayby the man had it, he showed me on his screen.

So there was no scam, it seemed, no accident, no attempt at crime. There was just something incommunicable between strangers.

I left him by backing away, then walking fast with the strange feeling that I had escaped some kind of harm. He looked dizzy with failure.

* * *

The summer I first started wearing a bra, Rae taught me how to fight. He was still a half-inch shorter than me but he weighed plenty more in muscle. Coach Stern saw him play a JV game and asked him to start practicing with the varsity boys, which gave him at least as much swagger as my figure had given me. Our bodies were announcing us as adults, ready for beauty and brutality—uniformed maneuvers and dresses that fit just so. During practice Rae heard some locker room talk about girls from school and though he never told me who said what, he didn't like it one bit. He wanted me to be able to defend myself. In the backyard he waged slow motion attacks, playing the part of a thug in the darkness.

Now if some jerk comes at you like this—what do you do?

Scream?

Naw, you gotta do more than that. Get him in the nuts. Get that motherfucker in the nuts, you hear?

He taught me about pressure points that he'd learned from a karate movie, a certain way I could chop someone's neck that would make him pass out. But nobody ever attacked me. I'm not even sure a single boy on the football team knew my name. I had to wonder if Rae had made it all up, if he'd wanted to be a protective older brother even though he was ten months younger and I wasn't that much to protect. The closest I ever came to defending myself was when I went on a field trip to Houston and my mom gave me a little pink can of mace.

It's awfully diverse down there, she said. *You just never know.*

But nothing happened in Houston. I came back to White Deer just fine and put the mace in a dust-gathering dollhouse, tucking it into a tiny bed under a tiny blanket.

Rae still asked me to practice self-defense moves with him every weekend, and I failed to get any better at them until I realized they were more for him than me. After that my reflexes seemed to quicken. I memorized all the pressure points, could throw a decent hook. It seemed I could successfully protect myself if I knew I was doing it for his benefit, a kind of sibling symbiosis.

* * *

The months after Rae's accident I had the repeated impulse to do something inappropriate, something dangerous, but the only thing I could think to do was not get off the subway when my stop came. I imagined seeing the doors open on 34th Street and shut on 34th Street, then on to 42nd, midtown, and so on, and all the while I'd just watch the stops go, watch the people

go and come and go again, watch the tunnels blur outside my window and at the end of the line I'd exit the train as if it were nothing and I'd leave the station and follow the sidewalks until there were no more sidewalks and I'd keep walking until I found myself in a far part of the city and I'd stay there.

I thought about the appointments I'd miss, the people missed, the days missed, my apartment growing dusty, job un-worked, e-mails piling up. I imagined my boss squinting at my disarrayed desk, wondering if my absence was (perhaps) the quiet evidence of my brutal murder, that maybe I was dead in my apartment, lying in my bathtub, disrobed and violated, my blood clotting in a thick, black pool. Or maybe it was just the flu. Or uncurbed addiction, a bender, a secret problem.

If I missed work for enough days and didn't answer my phone they'd probably call my emergency contact, but the one I'd given was a former roommate I hadn't spoken to since I moved to my studio. Since I'd not yet had an emergency, my emergency contact had never been contacted, but I guess that's the thing about emergency contacts (that you never know if they're any good until it's too late (until the emergency has already emerged, and a contact is unreachable)).

But I never did skip my stop. I always got out and went to work and no one ever had to call my emergency contact. The longer I fantasized about skipping my stop, the more I realized that it wasn't the kind of inappropriateness I was really after, so I began to imagine open-mouth kissing a stranger in the street, or doing an improvised soft-shoe routine down the center of a subway platform, or wearing a floor-length sequined dress to the grocery store. But I never did any of those things either.

I stayed the same.

Raeford was dead and I went about my business as if nothing had changed.

I did not become a new person. I did nothing notable. I was still just me.

The only thing I did after Rae died that I hadn't done before Rae died was tell people that Rae died.

Hey, how's it going? the barista at my coffee shop asked on my first morning in the city after the holidays and the funeral and the extra weeks I took off. It was the bitter peak of a pitch-black January.

Fine, I reflexed, then corrected myself, *No, not fine. I'm terrible. My brother is dead.*

Oh, he said. *Oh my god. I'm so sorry.*

It was hard to talk about coffee after that.

It's okay, I reflexed again, *Well, no, it's not okay. He's dead. He's going to be dead forever.*

Then it was even harder to talk about coffee. We were still for a beat until a Sheryl Crow song started blasting and he bolted to the back office to adjust the volume. Usually just the thought of Rae would lead swiftly to sobbing, but in public it was a novelty to feel almost nothing, not even that little tremble under the face.

While the barista was gone, I thought of my brother's ashes blowing around the Texas plains, swirled by turbines, gathering on truck windshields. (At the funeral Raeford's high school girlfriend, Mindy Plunkett, had shown up late and wedged herself into the family row.

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She had a big pink flower in her hair and she nodded at me like we were having the exact same thought. (But I was wishing time could run backwards and she could have not sat in the goddamn family row and she could walk backwards to her home and remove that flower from her terrible head and maybe the days could keep rolling backwards and I could have gone with Rae to that barn party the day after Christmas, or I could have at least driven and picked him up in Mom's Honda, and if I hadn't been as tired as I was, if only I hadn't eaten that piece of yellow cake that was dry on one side from being cut on Christmas Eve, if only that piece of yellow cake hadn't lulled me into a sugar-induced stupor and if I could have gone with him, driven with him home instead of into that tree, or maybe he could have driven us both, sleeping, into that pine tree, and if the awful smash of metal and speed and sleep could have crushed us both out of this world, then I wouldn't have to be here with Mindy Plunkett in the family row with that fake flower in her spray-pungent hair.) When she asked in a whisper where the body was I pointed to the urn and Mindy Plunkett flinched as if she'd just realized that's what dead means.)

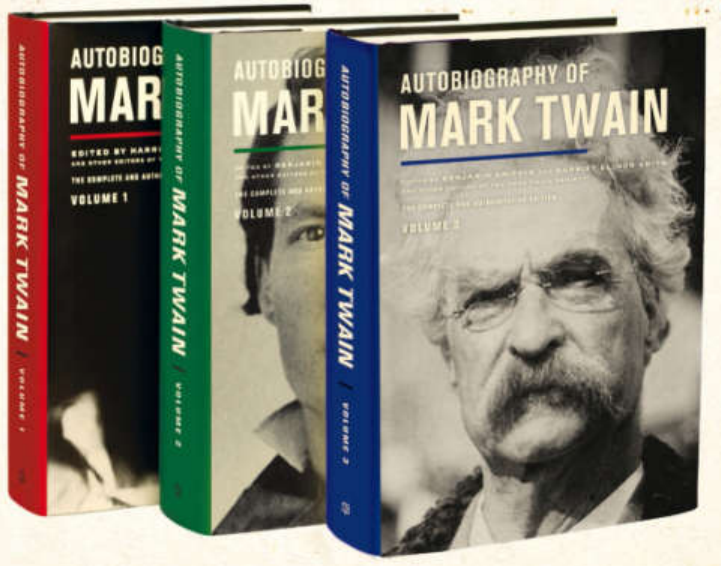
Maybe I didn't need any coffee, I thought, but then the barista was back, trying to mute his compassion, trying to just do his job, to ambivalently make coffee. Sheryl was telling us that if it makes you happy it can't be that bad, and I gave up trying to find a natural segue between death and coffee, just said, *A red eye, please,* but when he refused my three dollars I felt ridiculous again. I moped in the corner with my free coffee and ensuing guilt, while listening to a podcast about how geese use magnetic fields to migrate south for the winter.

* * *

Rebecca took me ice-skating in Bryant Park that afternoon, insisting it would be good for me to get out of my head, but midtown looked exactly the way my head felt: bleak and crowded, a few freezing vagrants shouting obscenities at no one in particular. It was an overcast Saturday and there were only a few holiday-bloated people going around the rink, their waddle-y movements suggesting hangovers. I couldn't think of a worse thing to do while hungover. People made less sense all the time.

Rebecca was the brightest spot on the rink by far, her bright blue scarf and yellow peacoat

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suggesting a radical tropical-ness, like Mindy Plunkett's flower. All the bright colors and reflected light from the rink made her pale skin seem even paler, but in a way that was more fecund than pneumonic—how did she do that, that healthy-pale thing? I never understood it. When she hugged me I saw a man in a respectable-looking herringbone coat throw up at the edge of the rink. This was just the world: ice and vomit and rare flashes of brilliant colors. Some people drive their trucks head-on into pine trees and snap their necks. Some people wear pink flowers to funerals. I can't see how anything is organized.

We skated arm in arm because Rebecca has the easy physical affection of someone who grew up in a nudist colony (since that's exactly what she did). At her apartment there is a buck-naked family portrait, all of them so pale it seems they're wearing opaque suits of sunscreen.

Rebecca didn't need to ask me how I was doing. She snaked one arm around mine then folded the other across her body to grip just above my elbow, knowing I needed to be held in place.

The thing is . . . your brother died, she said, breaking a long, skating silence. *Raeford died. Not you. You have to keep living.*

Her voice was strangely ebullient, like she said this sort of thing every day, like it was her own chipper mantra—*Raeford died. Raeford died.* My ankles were bowing in, a sore throb in the stretched meat under my arches. I wasn't built for that kind of thing.

You're still alive, so you have to keep living, she repeated. *That's all you can do.*

I was too saturated with consolation from the funeral and wake to absorb what she was saying, but later I grew to resent this moment. *You're still alive* was almost as bad as *Let me know if I can do anything,* and the empty glare that came after. I wondered how she would feel if she were the one dead and someone was telling her loved ones, *Rebecca died, not you! You get to go on living!* But I guess she'd just feel dead if she were dead and eventually I lost track of how I felt about her telling me I was still alive, still a life. We went back to our silent skating and I thought about the formation of ice crystals, tried and failed to remember facts from that podcast about them. A semi-androgynous child skated up to us, bright red face under considerable over-bundling.

Are you a princess? it asked Rebecca. *Are you Snow White?*

I wasn't surprised. Children flocked to Rebecca as if helpless, like a creepy inverse of pedophilia. They gave her compliments and knock-knock jokes, presenting their random shit as gifts—baggies of cheerios, long-loved stuffed animals. She had a special way with them, but over the years I had stopped paying attention to it. They never spoke to me, those kids, like I was the unknown cocktail waitress clinging to the elbow of a celebrity.

Rebecca unlinked from me and with nowhere to put my free arm, I thrust it into my tote bag, groping the apple I'd just bought out of guilt at a sad, two-table attempt at a farmers' market. All they had were bruised, worm-dimpled Macintoshes, but after a sample-woman intercepted me with a chunk on a toothpick, I felt obligated even though it was mealy and acrid.

Is she a witch? I heard the precocious thing ask Rebecca. Both of them turned to look at me. My bulky black overcoat, thick glasses, and charmless hair were not doing me any favors. Rebecca smiled, then turned back to the kid, trying to laugh it off. *What an imagination you have,* she said, but the little fucker kept a bitter eye flashing in my direction as it told Rebecca some dumb story about a snowball (an actual snowball or an animal named snowball?). This did not distract me from the kid's knee-jerk contempt. I'm not blind. What a little piece of shit.

I wordlessly flashed the apple, making a witch face, then relished the kid's look of perfect terror.

* * *

Too embarrassed to face the barista again, I learned to love the watery sweetness of bodega coffee, the way it left me half-tired and inattentive. (I was less effective at work for a while, but it seemed like everyone was feeling especially February that February. (Even when a late spring came, no one could forgive the long betrayal of winter.)) On the weekends I'd drink my bodega coffee on the little wooden bench outside, unless the hunchbacked man with the cigar was there, not just because the cheap cigar smoke bothered me, but because he always tried to give me advice about how to meet a nice man.

Everybody needs somebody. Aren't you afraid of being alone? he asked.

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Right now I'm just afraid of death.

Aha! The ultimate alone.

Do you know how to get over that?

I was serious but he just shrugged.

Maybe die?

I'll wait, I said.

I'd heard a podcast about a tribe somewhere whose spiritual practices had involved, through intense meditation, briefly dying and coming back to life. Practitioners would slow their breathing until it was imperceptible. Their hearts would stop and they would just lie there for a while, dead, until they eventually woke back up and went about the rest of their days. I can't remember the exact details of how this worked and I can't remember the cigar man's name anymore, just his plaid pants and the polite nods we exchanged after the *ultimate alone* conversation, because, really, what else was there to say?

Then it was June and I started to feel like a new woman—not in a new-lease-on-life kind of way, more like a refinanced mortgage. I wasn't in a better place, exactly, but I could make my payments on time—feed myself, dress myself, be at home without crying, no need to wander in public listening to an endless stream of pop-science, burning blisters into my feet. But in the same way warm molecules move toward cool ones, everyone's problems started coming on, making storms.

Some alleged harassment at the office meant we all had to go to Appropriate Behavior Workshops and for some reason I was asked to be in charge of getting my co-workers to turn in the Appropriate Behavior Rubric Worksheets, which were held in great contempt. They all began avoiding me, took the long way from their cubicles to the office kitchen. I stopped getting invites to happy hour (or maybe that was because I never said yes). Rebecca asked me to take care of her parrots for a few months while she did some volunteer work in Nicaragua and their squawking woke me up at odd hours. My downstairs neighbor told me they woke her up, too, and she swore she could even smell them. An increasingly hostile trail of sticky notes ensued.

Then I was buying my coffee at the bodega on a Sunday morning, counting out my dollar in change, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It had been so long I didn't even recognize him until he showed me his flip phone screen.

i fawn wat fel, it said.

I was sick of complication and just wanted one day of peace and silence, so I smiled and nodded as if I were refusing, for the hundredth time, to sign up for Amnesty International. But he followed me out and showed me his screen again.

i fawn ur heck box i am go get it

I don't know what you want from me, I said, and it came out a little too loud and mean. He seemed to almost tear up at this (or maybe that's just how his eyes were) then ran down the sidewalk.

Hey, cigar man shouted, *I didn't know you knew Maurice.*

I don't. He's just confused.

Well, what'd he want from you?

Nothing.

Be nice to Maurice, alright? He's had it hard. He's had it rough. It's the least you could do, he said.

Fine, I said, maybe too quietly, maybe so quietly I didn't say it at all.

I wasn't in the mood to be a person.

I didn't know what to do.

I'd thought my refinanced-mortgage attitude had been a signal I was getting better, but here I was again, just as terrible as I'd ever been.

I got in bed at eight that night and couldn't sleep. Maybe I could meditate myself to death and back, but I wasn't meditating. I was seething. (Was anger one of the approved steps to appropriate grieving or was that something from the behavior rubrics?) I seethed for a while, then I might have slept or died and was reborn when Mother called around midnight.

Is anger one of the steps of grieving? I asked after she told me she wanted to move to New York.

If you need it to be, honey.

I hoped that gentle tone meant she'd gone back to being who she used to be, that beige woman, the former Miss Neshoba County who had boot-strapped herself up when Dad left her in Amarillo, a woman who didn't complain about the wind or light in Texas, a mother who had only once raised her voice at me, a Texan who would remain a Texan, someone who could and would keep everything the same. I wanted her to tell me she was kidding about New York, that she wasn't going to change anything at all—but a few nights later she arrived, refusing my offer of the bed, saying she wouldn't be able to sleep if I was on the couch. I'm pretty sure neither of us slept because of the birds' intermittent squawks of *Becca! Becca!* and my neighbor's broom beating the ceiling under my floor.

This is just temporary, she said, *'til I find a*

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place of my own. I took to staying at the office late, then taking roundabout routes home, trying to exhaust myself so I could sleep.

What do you do all day? she asked one night, looking bewildered and somehow tiny, shrinking. She'd made an eight-dish dinner, most of it involving corn: creamy corn salad, bean salad with corn, corn bread, corn-stuffed chicken, gazpacho polka-dotted with little white kernels.

I have a job, Ma. I have to work.

With rent as high as it is, I guess you do have to work pretty hard. (A girlish fear was in her eyes, it seemed, and for some reason it reminded me of the only memory I had of Dad before he left. He was sorting the mail, ripping junk to pieces and making neat stacks of the rest, statements or bills or whatever. He studied two sheets of paper, trying to make sense of them, punching a calculator and scratching his beard. I feared the mail for years after, afraid of when it would finally come to me (that his problems would become mine).)

The weekends were somewhat better. I took Mom to museums and free concerts and we had some nice moments. She made us picnics for the park, where we'd end up napping, catching up on the sleep we'd lost to the birds. Eventually she seemed to stop looking for an apartment, though I couldn't bring myself to mention it. Maybe this was my life now. Maybe my mother just lived with me. And anyway, it wasn't as hard sharing the studio as I'd thought. She did all the grocery shopping and cooking, packed me lunches for work, and even started taking care of the birds, which had, in turn, chilled out enough for us to almost forget about them.

The respite lasted a week, until that last time I saw Maurice. We were walking to the F when he came running up, waving at me with one arm, the other holding up his pants. Mom clutched her purse and whimpered with her eyes shut, like a child trying to make something vanish.

His screen: *Ur back in der got done*

He looked happier than I'd ever seen him, ecstatic, nearly manic.

No! Just—ugh, no, I said, hoping he could at least read lips, that he could see a *No.*

What does he want? Mom asked. *What's going on?* She had stopped whimpering now that she realized she wasn't being attacked. She leaned into me—*is this about drugs? Are you involved in some kind of—*

He's just confused. I don't know this guy.

He seems to know you, she said as she inched away from him, but Maurice seemed to finally realize how pointless this was, how far away he was from making anything clear to me. He walked off, gave up like none of this had meant anything to him.

Then it really felt so fucking sad, that he would someday die with whatever it was he'd tried to say. (How often does this happen to anyone?) Mom was rattled but we went to the Met anyway. A few times on the train she asked me if I was in trouble, and I told her it was too stupid to explain. (I don't know why I didn't just tell her what had happened. (It felt, somehow, as private as a vital organ.))

Ladies and Gentlemen may I have your attention please, a man on the train said several times to us, taking our attention whether or not we wanted to give it. He played metallic-sounding music on his phone and danced like he was trying to throw his arms off his body.

Is he okay? Mom asked, *I mean, is this alright? Do people just . . . ?*

It's fine, Ma. He wants money.

The dancing man went up the aisle with a cracked take-out container but no one gave him anything.

Ha-ha! You guys—y'all—ha! the dancing man said, like this was all just a hilarious joke we had played on him, as if we had been in on it all along.

The rent is too high here, Ma said, and I was comforted by the way her voice was floaty and oblivious.

* * *

At the museum we hardly spoke, just moved in and out of the galleries, drifting by the artifacts as if we'd seen them many times before. *Wow, that sure is something right there,* she would say every twenty minutes. I could tell she was really just trying to read my thoughts.

We went to the cafeteria in the basement, bought plates of beef stew. In the booth next to ours an elderly couple also had plates of stew and miniature bottles of wine, and it was easy to imagine that this was what they did every Sunday for decades—went to the Met, sat in that booth.

You know, I didn't realize how dangerous it is here, Mom said.

It's not that dangerous.

She nodded at this, taking the statement superficially into account, not believing an inch of it.

There's so much need, she said. *And there's no space. Everyone's so desperate.*

(But what was wrong with feeling desperate? (I kept this question to myself.)) We forked bites of stew and chewed without looking at each other.

I read an article about the best cities to get old in and it said New York was a good place. You can walk around. Lots of resources and hospitals, she said. *Community and everything. So, I thought, well, I'll just move there. I'll sell everything I don't need, stuff you'd have to deal with on your own whenever I pass on . . .*

Her eyes drifted around the low ceilinged cafeteria in a kind of awe, until she caught the eye of the elderly couple and smiled big at them. They smiled briefly back, in pity, it seemed, then returned to their dinner.

I thought if I lived here I would need so much less. Everyone says that's good—living with less. And you could check in on me since no one would really do that in White Deer, you know. People just leave each other alone so much there and Maude is too busy and doesn't seem to care much for me anyway. So I thought, well, nobody really has to die so alone in New York. It might be a good place to get old and die—oh, goodness isn't that a sad thought?

I shook my head but I didn't know if I was agreeing or not.

Well, you know, these kinds of conversations aren't easy.

I filled up my mouth with beef and melted onion and a soft carrot hunk. I leaned away from my plate to push this food down my throat, to turn it into me.

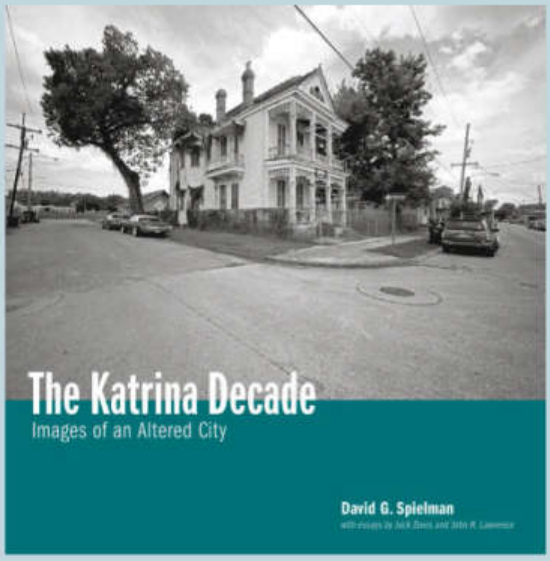
I just want to prepare you for that, you know, since you'll have to take care of all the arrangements on your own since Rae's gone and you're not married. But I don't think I'll be moving to New York and in fact, I'm going to buy my return ticket for this week. So—I don't know. I don't know what we'll do.

She pushed a pea across her plate, picked up a roll but lost interest in it before she could lift it to her mouth.

Well! Listen to me—doing all the talking like this. Do you have anything you'd like to say about all this?

There was something I wanted to say, something I needed to tell her. She put one hand up to her face and smiled as if this was some kind of teatime chat instead of what it was—cafeteria-grade beef in a stuffy basement under so many tons of the past.

Don't you have anything you'd like to say?



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Central City, 2012; ©David G. Spielman





"Loss of the Killing Instinct" (1977), acrylic on canvas. © Ginny Stanford

Last Panther of the Ozarks

BY ANSEL ELKINS

Books discussed in this essay:

What About This: Collected Poems of Frank Stanford, edited by Michael Wiegers. Copper Canyon Press, 2015. 764 pages.

Hidden Water: From the Frank Stanford Archives, edited by Michael Wiegers and Chet Weise. Third Man Books, 2015. 200 pages.

> In my early days I was a student of all forms. I learned everything and nothing. I practiced the katas of poetry. I listened to the blues. Having the equilibrium of a poet, I kept falling in love.
>
> —"With the Approach of the Oak the Axeman Quakes"

"Don't go down the rabbit hole," my husband tells me, but it's too late. It is 3 A.M. and I am still at my desk, the lamp burning hot on my notebook. I have spent the past fourteen hours scouring this book for hidden meanings, and it's leading me deeper and deeper into a strange world of psychedelic vision: *I can dream watching the shooting stars in a black dog's eye / I can dream a piano of bourbon / I can dream on Beale / I can dream even though I am asleep in a star drift.*

This is what obsession looks like: I am Dante following my Virgil, but if I journey too far into this underworld I fear I may not return. Yet this foreboding, mysterious landscape is familiar to me, so the allure is difficult to resist. "Just fifteen more minutes and I'll come to bed," I tell him, although I know this is a lie.

When I was twenty-three, I had a heady love affair with this beautiful Byronic poet from Mississippi, Frank Stanford. No matter that he was already dead—had been dead for years before I was born—or that he'd shot himself while his wife and his lover were in the house with him. I was poor and idealistic and living in Arkansas, the same state where he worked and died, when I found my way to his poems. When I first opened Stanford's slim book of posthumously published selected work, *The Light the Dead See,* every word rang true and glowed like burning coal. I was enraptured by his recklessness, his rebelliousness, his loneliness; I drank up his language like whiskey and was pulled into his dangerous, nocturnal world full of energy and eroticism and death.

The first poem I memorized from *The Light the Dead See* was "Memory Is like a Shotgun Kicking You near the Heart," which originally appeared in Stanford's 1978 collection *Crib Death.* It has remained with me a decade on. The poem begins:

I get up, walk around the weeds
By the side of the road with a flashlight
Looking for the run-over cat
I hear crying.

I think of the hair growing on the dead,
Any motion without sound,
The stars, the seed ticks
Already past my knees

The narrator describes a solitary night walk in the woods (through the "deer path / Down the side of the hill to the lake"), shining his flashlight on passing scenes, searching for something lost, yet unknown even to the searcher. I too was possessed by restlessness, rising to wander after midnight in my own loneliness—questioning why I was more at home in the night than the day. The poem ends where it began:

When I get home
I drink a glass of milk in the dark.

She gets up, comes into the room naked
With her split pillow,
Says what's wrong,
I say an eyelash.

Trying to describe the effects of a poem, the mysterious mechanics of its power, is like trying to describe how good sex is good. As Jorge Luis Borges said, "If you don't feel poetry, if you have no sense of beauty . . . then the author has not written for you." This poem, I felt immediately, was mine.

Sometimes reading Stanford I sense that his poems are coded, that if I could only lift the veil of his secret language I'd uncover a whole other world of meaning. He wrote from the historical id, charting the unconscious mind of the South—nightmarish, violent, haunted—along with an idea of himself, both real and invented, which was steeped in personal loss and fragmented identity. Like the night sky, Frank Stanford changes before my eyes—even still. He is a constant stranger: elusive and unknowable, unreachable as the moon that rides brightly across the black.

* * *

like a river comes to love its journey
I came to love you in dreams
— "Swimming towards Women"

Since his suicide in June 1978, Stanford has stood on the margins of American poetry. His work is rarely included in major contemporary anthologies and he risks the plight of many idiosyncratic, difficult, or weird artists: that of the cult favorite, to be championed by a passionate few (or worse, to be written off as a folkie regionalist). During Stanford's lifetime, the independent, Seattle-based Mill Mountain Press published his books, many of which have fallen out of print, making it difficult for all but his most dedicated followers to find his work. But with the release of *What About This: Collected Poems of Frank Stanford* in April, his ghost has been conjured up. Edited by Michael Wiegers, Copper Canyon Press's executive editor, the collection presents Stanford's published and unpublished poems, short prose—including an essay about his creative process, "With the Approach of the Oak the Axeman Quakes"—interviews, drafts, photographs, and ephemera, as well as excerpts from his ecstatic four-hundred-page epic, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You.* At last comes Stanford's chance to be read by a wider audience. To those readers unacquainted with his poetry, in the poet's own words: "you are getting into a different and strange country."

This beast of a book arrived in my mailbox last May. My first thought was that the title *What About This* feels strangely inconsequential next to Stanford's previous works: *The Singing Knives, Ladies from Hell, Arkansas Bench Stone,* and the macabre *Crib Death*—all instantly recognizable as coming from his particular world and lexicon. The cover bears a blue-washed photo of Stanford crouching in a field of wildflowers, a paperback in his hands. He gazes outward from beneath leonine black curls and his stern, pensive brow. ("The dark-eyed orphan," he called himself in one poem.) The book is as handsome and imposing as he was—yet I hesitated before opening it. Like an old lover, the poet's myth had been cast in my memory, and now I risked breaking it open and finding not flaming poems but smoke. I was afraid to confront the possibility that my love for his work had faded. "There's nothing cold as ashes," sings Loretta Lynn, "after the fire is gone." Some say this about Thomas Wolfe, that you can only really read him when you're young. That only the young can be swept away with that language of exuberance, so enchanted with those endless sentences, that boundless energy and vigor that is intoxicated by itself. When I checked my mailbox that day, it had been eight years since I'd read a poem by Frank Stanford.

The collection sent me reeling back to 2005, the year I lived in Conway, Arkansas, and worked for this magazine. I'd relocated from Portland, Oregon, to a place where I knew no one. I moved into a decrepit, ramshackle two-story house, the only woman with five to eight (depending on the week) male roommates—Marxists, musicians, aspiring novelists. At times we lived like squatters, without heat or electricity. I slept on a twin mattress on the floor, washed my hair in the kitchen sink, and read by candlelight when we couldn't make the electricity bill.

Stanford's poems lived among us in that house; we passed them around with the bottles of whiskey. The rawness, the energy, and the urgency of his language coursed through me. "He was crazy, he was a dreamer, lovely and dark," Stanford writes in "The Lacuna." His passion and musicality echoed Federico García Lorca and my favorite Latin American poets like Pablo Neruda. Before I read Stanford, my love of Southern literature came mostly from fiction—Faulkner, O'Connor, Capote, Hurston, Welty, Wolfe—but I had not

yet met a kindred spirit in verse whose voices and views of the South resonated with my own. Having grown up in Alabama at the close of the twentieth century, I was a young writer searching for a way to transform my personal history into my own vision and creative voice. I had been away for years—college in the northeast, followed by the stint in Portland—and now, living in Arkansas, I was re-immersed into my native culture and people. My love affair with Stanford was a love affair with being young in the Dirty South.

In Stanford's writing, I encountered a lawless language and a feral imagination unlike anything I'd read before. His poems are set in honky-tonks and juke joints and backwoods pool halls laden with whiskey, gambling, sex, and violence. Stanford was influenced by country and blues music. He even titled several of his poems after Jimmie Rodgers's lonesome blue yodel, a cry that had reached me deeply and which later gave my first book its name. "Freedom, Revolt, and Love," another poem that held me hostage from the first reading, was published the year after his death in the 1979 collection *You.* Revisiting it in *What About This,* I felt myself drawn back into Stanford's gravity, and marveled again at his ability to set a scene freighted with doom:

They caught them.
They were sitting at a table in the kitchen.
It was early.
They had on bathrobes.
They were drinking coffee and smiling.
She had one of his cigarillos in her fingers.
She had her legs tucked up under her in the chair.
They saw them through the window.

The moment is loaded with imminent violence. You sense it as soon as you enter his world; the ominous pervades his writings—in tone, syntax, line length, imagery, and metaphor—the specter of death looms over every line, as if the people he writes about are cursed. The indefinite pronouns obscure the characters but the short, tense sentences and end-stopped lines heighten the drama as it unfolds before our eyes and we witness the intruders come in "through the back":

The stove was still on and burned the empty pot.
She started to get up.
One of them shot her.
She leaned over the table like a schoolgirl doing her lessons.
She thought about being beside him, being asleep.
They took her long grey socks
Put them over the barrel of a rifle
And shot him.
He went back in his chair, holding himself.
She told him hers didn't hurt much,
Like the fall when everything you touch
Makes a spark.

I admire how Stanford enlaces tenderness in this scene of gruesome violence, which, in his world, occurs as abruptly as a summer thunderstorm. As do moments of passion that flash into being with all the swiftness of wildfire in a dry season.

It has been encouraging to follow the initial response to the collection; it seems Stanford may finally get the wide recognition he deserves. In the *New Republic,* Jay Deshpande wrote, "*What About This* marks a rare moment, when a critical and completely origi-



nal American voice is recovered after decades and takes its rightful place in the canon." In the *New York Times,* Dwight Garner called Stanford an "important and original American poet—sensitive, death-haunted, surreal, carnal, dirt-flecked and deeply Southern." And in the *Arkansas Times,* Matthew Henriksen argued for Stanford's influence: "The poetry is indeed written exhaustively, and has an unrelenting energy that might, most importantly, catch the attention of younger readers and help them potentially seek their own voices as writers."

Stanford was astoundingly prolific, and there's no way his irrepressible exuberance can be contained in any single volume—though Copper Canyon's collection represents an unprecedented effort. In addition to unpublished manuscripts, *What About This* offers other treasures, like a facsimile of the rejection slip from the Academy of American Poets' Walt Whitman Award, to which Stanford submitted *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* in 1974:

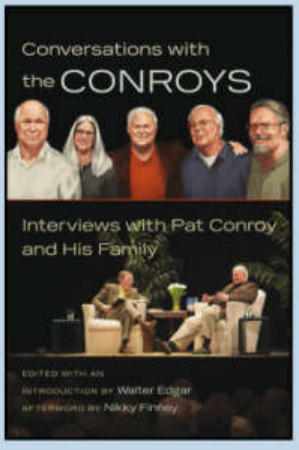
> Dear Mr. Stanford:
>
> We just cannot accept a manuscript for the W. Whitman Award competition that is significantly longer than 100 pages. If you are not able to cut down your entry to that length, then you should not send it in to this particular competition.

Alan Dugan, the Pulitzer Prize–winning poet, had recognized Stanford's originality and championed the twenty-six-year-old's work. When Dugan heard about the dismissal, he wrote to the organization's assistant executive editor, and his letter is also included in *What About This:*

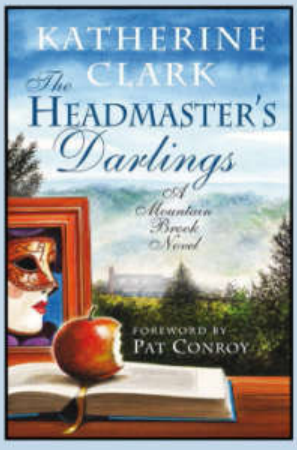
> I think you have made a mistake. Stanford is a brilliant poet and just because he is ample in his work, like Whitman, is no reason not to consider his manuscript. . . . I've been reading his work for the last four years or so and I'm convinced of his genius as a writer.

The Whitman Award is a competition for poets who have not yet published a first book, so Stanford wouldn't have been eligible anyway (his debut, *The Singing Knives,* was published in 1971). But the Academy of American Poets' refusal to consider Stanford's manuscript due to its Whitmanesque length is indicative of why it's taken critics several decades to awaken to this blue Andalusian rooster crowing its strange and glorious tune right outside their window.

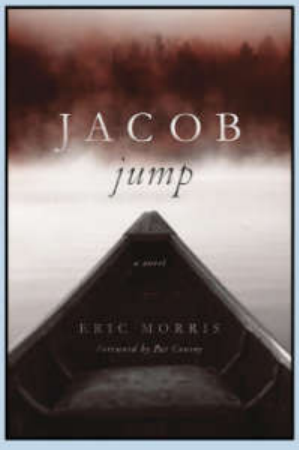
In late July, Third Man Books, an imprint of Jack White's Third Man Records in Nashville, released *Hidden Water: From the Frank Stanford Archives* as a companion edition to *What About This.* Edited by Wiegers and Chet Weise, the collection offers previously unpublished letters—to Dugan, Allen Ginsberg, and others; more drafts and poems; and photographs, including a few from the filming of Stanford's surrealistic 1974 autobiographical short film, *It Wasn't a Dream, It Was a Flood.* There is also a partial list of the contents of his record collection at the time of his death, which included blues and jazz. Also released, as a download, is a previously unheard recording of Stanford reading his poem "The Boathouse," in a voice that sounds uncannily like James Dickey's, defiant and bold, with an opera recording providing an appropriately disorienting counterpoint in the background. The cover of *Hidden Water* features a gorgeous acrylic portrait by Ginny Crouch Stanford, the late poet's wife, which she painted at his request, an homage to Henri



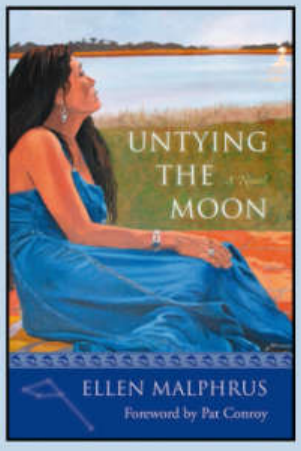
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Rousseau's "The Sleeping Gypsy." Titled "Loss of the Killing Instinct," it depicts Stanford sitting cross-legged, wrapped in a quilt, beside a black panther beneath a full moon with faint stars in the canvas of the night sky.

* * *

so far I am the only poet of my kind in
this country
though you have probably noticed by
now that I am from another country
— *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*

I was recently at a cocktail party in Connecticut, standing alone in a manicured, Japanese-inspired garden where a crowd of strangers held wine glasses and talked in stiff, polite ways. The razor-perfect rectangular hedges and strict geometry of the space made it difficult to move freely so I helped myself to the hors d'oeuvres and pretended to admire the flowers, some of which, I noticed, were plastic. At one point, I found myself in conversation with a middle-aged poet in a tie. He made a few remarks, then proceeded to talk extensively about himself. His nose was curved into a slight sneer. Eventually he asked what I was working on. An essay about Frank Stanford, I told him. The poet in the tie looked disinterested. "I've heard his name. He's from somewhere in the South, right? Is he any good?"

Before I could tell him that Frank Stanford is more than just "good"—that he was a prodigy—the poet in the tie interrupted me to ask the server for another glass of wine. I could never imagine Frank Stanford at a garden party in Connecticut, well-behaved and wearing a tie. In the photographs I've seen, he's more often than not barefoot, with at least the top three buttons of his shirt undone or just plain missing. The Mississippi-born, Memphis-bred poet once shot off a double-barreled shotgun in the middle of a party he'd thrown for Allen Ginsberg because he considered some of the guests to be "lightweights," his longtime friend Bill Willett recently recalled to *Men's Journal.* "All the lightweights left."

Stanford attended high school at Subiaco Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains, where he converted to Catholicism and was profoundly influenced by the monks. In 1966, he enrolled at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, and though he impressed his teachers—the poet James Whitehead admitted him, a freshman, into a graduate poetry workshop—Stanford dropped out after two years and quickly claimed a persona as an untamed sojourner on the margins of the civilized world. His school was the Mississippi Delta with its bayous and levees, peopled by a cast of characters with names like Born In The Camp With Six Toes, Tang, Ray Baby, Bobo, and Dark. He read as voraciously as he wrote. "A lot of people label all Southern things as 'Southern grotesque,'" Stanford once said in an interview. "I've had some Yankee say, 'This is Southern grotesque.' And I've seen men actively come out against anything that can be construed as Southern." His deeply literate work is a rebuke to those who would dismiss his talent because he wrote of and from the Deep South, because he was a stubborn autodidact, because he often repeated motifs. As Dwight Garner noted in his review of *What About This,* Stanford "has sometimes been viewed as a primitive. He wasn't one. It's apparent in his poems that he had read and seen almost everything; his cultural memory was long." He was proudly a renegade poet who wrote with vitality and immediacy, inventing a cosmology of his own design.

* * *

When you take the lost road
You find the bright feathers of morning
Laid out in proportion to snow and light
And when the snow gets lost on the road
Then the hot wind might blow from the
south
And there is sadness in bed for twenty
centuries
And everyone is chewing the grass on
the graves again.
— "Circle of Lorca"

In 1972, Stanford suffered a breakdown, after the dissolution of his first marriage, which had lasted less than a year. At the urging of his mother, he checked himself into a mental hospital in Little Rock. The next few years were itinerant and productive. His first publisher, Irving Broughton, whom he met in the summer of 1970 at the Hollins Conference in Creative Writing and Cinema in Virginia, sparked Stanford's interest in filmmaking, and the two traveled the northeast and to New York in 1972, interviewing poets and writers for a three-volume series, *The Writer's Mind.* He spent time in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, where he established a classic film series at the Center Street Theatre and met and married a painter named Ginny Crouch. All the while, he wrote, publishing his first collection of poetry, and continuing work on *The Battlefield.*

In 1975, Stanford returned to Fayetteville. He worked as an unlicensed land surveyor and established Lost Roads Press in an effort "to reclaim the landscape of American poetry" by publishing the works of talented young poets whose voices went unrecognized by the conventional presses. He befriended writers in the University of Arkansas's MFA program, including the poet C. D. Wright, a recent graduate with whom he soon began an affair that would last until his death. With his wife, Ginny, residing at her family's farm in southern Missouri, he was able to maintain an alternate life, living with his lover in Fayetteville. Together Stanford and Wright operated Lost Roads out of the garage of her rented house and, in 1977, the press published as its first volume Wright's *Room Rented By A Single Woman.* After Stanford's death, Wright took over directorship of the press and continued its mission, in her words, to publish "the beautiful wild poets we grow from the road."

Lost roads—the image resonates. I've been chasing down them like a bloodhound in pursuit of Stanford's ghost. Just when I think I've got him in my sight, he evaporates like a mirage, a wave of light shimmering at the vanishing point of the long hot highway I've been traveling. When he was a boy, Frank's mother called him a "chosen child." Then in 1968, when he was twenty, she revealed to him that he was in fact adopted. Was this the original lie that begat a lifetime of lies and fabrications? If he no longer knew who his parents were, then they could be anyone, and thus he could weave his origins into a grand legend. He could become the true bastard son of the literary South.

While in Connecticut, I visited the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale, which holds Stanford's papers, bequeathed by C. D. Wright and Ginny Stanford, co-executors of his estate. There I came across Wright's notes from a phone conversation she had with Bill Willett, Stanford's high school friend and football teammate at Subiaco. It appears she, too, was trying to construct a reliable biography:

Learned of his adoption in 68
made huge difference to him

that he had been misled
as youth claimed his lineage traced to
Earl of Sandwich + proud of that
(from his mother's side)

Frank Stanford was born Francis Gildart Smith on August 1, 1948, in Richton, Mississippi, at Emery Memorial Home and Hospital for unwed mothers. Although the Home burned under "mysterious circumstances" in 1964 and its records were lost in the blaze, Beinecke holds a copy of his Decree of Adoption, which gives the only solid information we have about his origins. "1949," a previously unpublished one-line poem included in *What About This,* may reveal the poet's resentment toward his unknown birth mother: "A whore blowing smoke in the dark."

Shortly after his birth he was adopted by Dorothy Gilbert Alter, a divorcée. The following year, Dorothy adopted a second child, Frank's sister Ruth, who seems to have been a glimmer of sweetness in Stanford's childhood. On September 22, 1949, the *Delta Democrat Times* published a brief account of Ruth's homecoming:

> Small Francis Gildart Alter today heads a welcome committee made up of family and friends, who are greeting Bettina Ruth Alter who was born last Thursday and has come to make her home in Greenville with Mrs. Dorothy Gilbert Alter and Francis. The head welcome seems to think that the new arrival belongs to him alone and perhaps that isn't a bad idea as every little girl needs a big brother to smooth the road for her.

Years later, in a poem titled "The Unbelievable Nightgown," from his second book, *Shade* (1973), Stanford writes:

Of my sister I can only say
She was like a long feather
Who could breathe under the water
And snarl without lipstick
Or meaning it
Her hair was like a wildcat
Caught in some fisherman's nets
She wore it like a Cajun whore

His complicated, often negative, depictions of women are just the most obvious manifestation of how boys were celebrated in the world of Southern men. "Alabama eats its young," my grandfather once told me. Perhaps this burden of Southern manhood, of having to be the golden boy, the chosen child, consumed the young Frank Stanford, too.

In 1952, Dorothy Alter married Albert Franklin Stanford, an older wealthy engineer, and moved the family to his home in Memphis. A. F. Stanford worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, building levees along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Frankie, as Stanford was called, spent his childhood summers with his stepfather in the levee camps, which inspired his most ambitious work, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You.* The 15,283-line poem was carved from a longer work titled "St. Francis and the Wolf," which he began writing while in high school. In *The Battlefield* he weaves his personal history into mythology, creating his own *Odyssey,* his own *Beowulf.* "i francis gildart knight of the levees and / rivers and ships," he proclaims. Full of bravado and boyish, adolescent posturing, he brags of his exploits and outlaw spirit. The poem is a kind of bildungsroman that features Stanford's alter ego, Francis Gildart, the heroic twelve-year-old boy at the story's center. Although as sprawling as Whitman's *Song of Myself,* it is more of a *Huckleberry Finn* tale of a boy's coming-of-age adventure in the Mississippi Delta, which he casts as a mystifying, magical, and violent landscape. It is a phantasmagoric and psychedelic work, an amalgam of biblical, vernacular, and mythological references, written in a heated frenzy. At times nightmarish, at times a gorgeous reverie, *The Battlefield* is a story of the South in the era of Jim Crow; at its heart is the young narrator's grief over the lynching of his friend Sylvester, a wrongfully accused black man. Francis Gildart goes with Sylvester's mother to cut him down from the tree and give him a proper burial. Stanford wrote this epic in a spasm of energy and anger over the many injustices faced by blacks in America. Sadly, its lessons are as relevant today as they were in the 1960s.

"Although I don't want people at the end of it to say that this was obviously a poem, I want it to have the traits of a poem—as a symphony has the traits of a symphony," Stanford told Irv Broughton, in 1974. The Mississippi River imbued Stanford's poetry with its mythic power and rhythms: "What I want to do is use movement and rhythm on different levels. I want it to be like the reader was going into reading the poem as they were going for a boat ride in some swift water." Greenville, the setting of Stanford's earliest years, was the place that inspired William Alexander Percy to write *Lanterns on the Levee,* and where a young Walker Percy and Shelby Foote became best friends, driving together on a literary pilgrimage to Rowan Oak to visit Faulkner. Little Frank even attended the same Episcopal Sunday School as Foote's daughter Margaret. The family of Ellen Gilchrist, who studied under Eudora Welty, lived just down the road a piece in Issaquena County. This was the literary world that gave birth to Frank Stanford and gave him his sense of purpose and destiny.

When I read *The Battlefield,* I read it as Southern history, bearing witness to the region's accursed past. This bastard son clearly struggled with the legacy of his uncertain place in a privileged lineage. In a letter to Dugan published in *Hidden Water,* Stanford describes his alter ego in *The Battlefield:* "The character is endowed with the gift of second sight at birth. What would seem to most a blessing is, in fact, a curse. To expiate that curse, he sets out in a raft, alone and bound, and lets the river carry him where it may. He is constantly in pain."

* * *

The pounding of your heart's drum
Together with another one,
Didn't you think anyone loved you?
— Lucinda Williams, "Sweet Old World"

Long before I ever heard Stanford's name, I grew up listening to "Sweet Old World," the song Lucinda Williams—one of Frank's lovers and the daughter of Fayetteville poet Miller Williams—wrote about his suicide. My mother loved the song, which she said reminded her of her brother, Robert, who shot himself when he was twenty-seven. As a girl, I would occasionally hear "Sweet Old World" being played somewhere in the house and I would walk into the kitchen and find my mother crying.

Stanford spent the last three weeks of his life in New Orleans with the poet Ralph Adamo and the writer Ellen Gilchrist. "Frank Stanford was my closest friend," Gilchrist told me in an email. As Gilchrist's biographer, Mary McCay, wrote, Stanford "may well have been the most influential person in her life." In Gilchrist's published journals, *Falling Through Space,* she describes Stanford as she saw him:

> I knew a poet once and spent many days and nights with him and took walks with

him and went into shops with him and watched the world with him and learned to adore the beauty of the world and despise its sadness. I must write of him someday and tell the world what it was like to know a great poet and be his friend. When he killed himself over some long-buried sadness, I could not bear to remember him and threw away all his books and all his letters and everything that had anything to do with him except an unpublished manuscript that was dedicated to me. It's still around. Even in my sadness and rage I couldn't throw that away.

Although he was little known beyond a small circle of writers who championed his work, and a growing number of young poets, he inspired great loyalty and admiration from everyone around him. Twenty years later, Gilchrist remembered him in his final days to the *New Yorker*'s Bill Buford, who was writing a profile of Lucinda Williams: "To know Frank then was to see how Jesus got his followers."

On June 3, 1978, the day Frank Stanford left this sweet old world, two months shy of his thirtieth birthday, he flew back to Arkansas from New Orleans. When he got home, Stanford found his wife, Ginny, and his lover, C. D. Wright, waiting for him; they had spent the last several days together, unraveling his lies and his numerous affairs, and Ginny had filed for divorce. That night he retrieved the .22-caliber pistol he kept at his office, and later, at home, Stanford went into his bedroom and shot himself three times in the heart. The two women heard it. In her essay "Death in the Cool Evening," titled after one of her husband's poems, Ginny Stanford recalled the moment: "Frank fired three shots into his chest. Three pops, three cries. . . . I heard the crack and just as sharp I heard Frank hollering, 'Oh'—surprised. . . . Pop Oh! Pop Oh! Pop Oh!" In the poem "Instead," originally published in *You,* he writes:

Death is a good word.
It often returns
When it is very
Dark outside and hot,
Like a fisherman
Over the limit,
Without pain, sex,
Or melancholy.
Young as I am, I
Hold light for this boat.

Frank Stanford's death was an act of passion. Or at least that's how I'd always thought of it until this spring, when I read his will—handwritten on ruled notebook paper. It bears the date "Monday, 22nd May," so it was composed in New Orleans, less than two weeks before his death. Nowhere on these four pages is the word "will" or anything so literal. Ginny Stanford attested, "The holographic will was brought to me by the deceased on the day of his death," and she submitted it to the Washington County Probate Court. His handwriting was confirmed by three of his friends, including his former teacher James Whitehead. It comprises a list of things that he hoped would be taken care of following his death: funeral instructions, dedications for his unpublished works, even, on page one, what appears to be a side note—JAZZ TO GET, listing Pharoah Sanders's 1977 album *Pharoah,* the John Vidacovich Trio, and Tony Dagradi's (Stanford mistakenly writes "Eddie DeGrady") Astral Project, all of whom he had presumably seen play in New Orleans at Jazz Fest. Stanford left the rights to all his works to his wife and Wright, seemingly aware that the two of them would be brought together by his death. "The only reason I'm doing this is so you both can have all rights to books—Both of you can have everything I have, and all rights to everything in future." He leaves clear instructions as to what should happen to him after his death: "non religious burial, no family, no friends, cheapest place + cheapest way. Fayetteville." Two pages later, he elaborates:

My mother, grandmother, sister, family—Ginny's, Carolyn's, mine—should not attend my burial. No ceremony. They are too dear and too old to take it. I love them.

I don't even think it will be a good idea for you two to go—ANY Body, for that matter. No ceremony, just whatever it takes to make health regulation—As I heard them say, "You can't even bury a dog these days, without hiring a lawyer!"

But there was a ceremony. And family and friends attended. Stanford was not buried in Fayetteville as requested, but in St. Benedict's Cemetery at Subiaco, in the Ozark Mountains, where he attended high school. "We buried him barefoot in that kimono," wrote Ginny Stanford. "The funeral home said no at first. They insisted he wear a suit and shoes. Claimed it was a state law."

★★★

Tonight there is so much moon
I could write
You a letter
Instead I'm going
To leave
— "Blue Yodel of Just Another Gigolo"

Borges once discussed the metaphor of the moon as used in classical Persian poetry:

Let us look at the moon as a mirror of time. I think this is a very fine metaphor—first, because the idea of a mirror gives us the brightness and the fragility of the moon, and, second, because the idea of time makes us suddenly remember that that very clear moon we are looking at is very ancient, is full of poetry and mythology, is as old as time.

"The moon is with me always wherever I go," Stanford wrote; it appears, in various guises, in much of his poetry. As I write this, a nearly full moon is high in the eastern sky, and the tide is coming in on Little Narragansett Bay at the mouth of Long Island Sound. This is the New England that I love—given to the natural rhythms of the sea—not the tidy walled-in gardens. A foghorn sounds its low baritone call and the bell buoys deliver their response. Latimer's Light flickers in the distance. And though the night sky is now beneath the moon's reign and the stars are faint, Venus and Jupiter are bright in the west behind me.

Poets, like the moon, are constantly changing. It's our nature. And writing about Stanford's work is like walking into the wilderness at night to try to capture a wild panther, a powerful hunter whose coat is the color of midnight. This creature is bigger and wilder than I, an animal not meant to be tamed. Frank Stanford's poems are so full of the raw force of life that it is difficult for me to reconcile the circumstances of his death. His territory is the night, where secrets and lies can be hidden. "The poet is a liar who always speaks the truth," wrote Jean Cocteau. And so my search ends as it began, with me beguiled.

What About This and *Hidden Water,* considered together with *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You,* give us Stanford's body of work in one place, more or less, allowing us to explore his cosmos on our own. The night sky is vast and incomprehensible in its eternity. The stars that fill it are too distant to touch, but we can chart them and describe patterns to illuminate our myths.

SLIM JIMS AND MONSTER

BY CHRIS OFFUTT

Recently my wife suggested I write a column about meals I actually prepare. She was making fun of me in that good-natured way of couples (vicious passive-aggressive combat) and I huffily pointed out that I'd already written about omelets. Uh-huh, she said, breakfast. Yes, you can make eggs.

The subtext of our conversation was typical of married people—in our case, ten years now. She cooked more than I did, far more in fact, and was undergoing one of those moments of minor resentment. She's a much better cook than I am, but more importantly, she cares deeply about food. She studies cookbooks like a scholar and can talk quite capably with chefs about the intricacies of what happens unseen in a heated pot. (My layman's understanding is that food cooks in there.) Until meeting her, I ate a lot of breakfast and sandwiches. My sole foray into making tacos ended up burning the windowsill so badly that it ripped a layer of paint away. I tried spaghetti once that wound up mostly on the ceiling, stuck so tightly that I just painted over it a few years later.

My wife reminded me of two culinary successes, or at least meals that my sons enjoyed. One was called "Monster," and consisted of a giant pancake filled with peanut butter and chocolate chips. Another was a special dessert I prepared the night before leaving town for a prolonged stay in Hollywood. It has never received a name but involved the breading and deep-frying of Slim Jims with powdered sugar and chocolate sauce. I resisted writing about these remarkable recipes because there's not much more to be said beyond the preceding descriptions. Both turned out great, though my wife demurred when it came to taking a second bite of either.

As a young man I lived in Salem, Massachusetts, with two roommates. David was a painter and cartoonist from Kansas. Jim was a local boy who worked for a machinist and wanted to be a physicist. I washed dishes at a lunch restaurant fifteen hours a week and spent the rest of the time reading and writing. At a certain point the three of us decided to save money by eating at home. One night per week, each of us would cook a meal. The extra cash would go to beer. Jim's specialty was tuna-mac with cheese, an amazing creation for mortaring a stone wall, but less so for eating. It was impossible to remove the leftover food adhering to the plates and the pot. Instead of washing them, Jim tucked them under his bed and hoped no one would notice. In fact, we didn't, and eventually ran out of plates.

David made a variation of tortilla Española, which means Spanish omelet. It was allegedly invented by Tomas Zumalakarregi Imatz, a Basque general known for consistent victory in the Carlist War by using guerrilla tactics. My roommate tended to cook with a similar guerrilla mentality: slicing potatoes of various widths, dicing onions so old they were sprouting, and shredding moldy cheese. He beat all this together with a dozen eggs then dumped it in a pan and baked it. Since we lacked a pie plate, he used a skillet. The hard plastic handle softened under heat, and Dave used a hand towel instead of an oven mitt. (He eventually threw out the fused skillet and towel.) The ensuing "meal" stuck to the pan because he didn't coat it with oil. Lacking plates, we ate it off a pile of discarded copies of the *Salem Evening News.*

I managed to put off my turn in the rotation by bringing food home from the restaurant where I worked. The next time my turn arrived, I took them to a nearby tavern that put out a big happy-hour spread for free, and told them to eat all they wanted. Despite the chips, dip, cheese, crackers, and summer sausage, they objected. I pointed out that I had "provided" a meal, which was the same as cooking, and the conversation moved toward a debate on semantics. That suited me, since the focus was now shifted away from their deluded perception that I had shirked my culinary responsibilities. My technique of providing worked well for several months until we got thrown out of the Knights of Columbus hall for reasons unrelated to lack of Italian lineage. It was over thirty years ago, but I seem to recall a problematic blend of beer, a microphone, and a hat with rabbit ears.

I'm not sure if my old friends still cook, but I am proud of how they turned out. David is an infographical artist for the *Boston Globe.* Jim is a physicist who once worked at the Sandia National Laboratories and now raises champion orchids. They are quite dismayed that I have a quarterly food column. In a Facebook message Dave suggested that it be retitled "Not-Cooking with Chris, Bless His Heart." David always did think he was a funny fellow.

Many years later I found myself in a similar situation regarding the division of household chores with my wife. Most couples have conversations along these lines. As a man who has had the dubious fortune of cohabiting with four women in my life, I have learned various methods of negotiation. First, I open with the offer to do all the outside work—mowing, raking leaves, picking up sticks, cleaning the gutters, and shoveling snow. As a bonus I always pledge to take out the garbage. That usually gets affairs off to a good start since the women in my life are not particularly enticed by outside labor.

The laundry is another matter altogether. I'm not opposed to doing the laundry. In fact, I enjoy transforming dirty clothes to clean, plus there is nothing better after a shower in winter than a towel fresh from the dryer. However, all the women I have ever known, including my mother and sisters, go through clothes like Sherman through Georgia. More perplexing is that they also enjoy the habit of leaving their clothes scattered about various rooms on furniture and the floor. More than once I have sustained vitriolic admonishment for committing the sin of mixing delicates with non-delicates.



Recently, my wife and I came to a detente after I ruined a flimsy blouse with enough doo-dads hanging from it to outfit a rockabilly star in the 1950s. That, combined with my inability to fold certain clothes, created a great marital drama. It should be noted that my wife removes all her clothing inside-out, and apparently there are some workout tops that have a sewn-in flap that serves as a brassiere. I could not make heads or tails of it when it came to folding. Finally I concluded it was some sort of trendy skirt. I dutifully clipped it to a hanger and hung it in the closet among her dresses. There it remained for months while she sought it, and I denied any knowing where it was.

The upshot was that we divvied the laundry chore equally—she'd wash hers and I'd wash mine. Naturally she pointed out the dire injustice of our arrangement. She changes clothes at least twice a day, sometimes three times if there's an evening event, producing an inordinate amount of laundry. My habits are simple—each week I wind up with two dirty shirts and three dirty pairs of socks. Pants I typically wear for two weeks at a time. I gave up underwear twenty years ago for economic reasons.

My wife's agenda for our next official House Meeting prioritized cleaning the indoors. Since moving to Mississippi, I no longer needed to chip ice or shovel snow, and my wife suggested I do a little extra indoors. I heartily concurred. Our agreement was this: she'd wash all the dishes every day and I'd vacuum twice a week. We have a built-in automatic dishwasher, and a part of me suspected that I got the short end of the stick in terms of time and effort. However, my wife had consistently criticized my style of loading the dishwasher, which apparently complains if the items lack the correct proximity to each other. It's possible the machine communicates with my wife when I'm asleep.

Complicating matters, my wife is one of those people who believes that every dish, utensil, and glass must be washed before going into the dishwasher. I pointed out the obvious fallacy to this. She countered with the fact that certain pieces of food actually harden on a plate in a dishwasher. My point that it would be sanitary fell on deaf ears.

"Uncertain Tall Stack" (2008), by Eric Yahnker

To correct the obvious imbalance of domestic duties, I purchased a robot vacuum cleaner and quickly became a fan of the Roomba. It wanders around the house picking up dog hair and dirt with an admirable diligence. Best of all, when the battery runs out, it returns to the charger on its own! I came to cherish our intimate evenings while my wife washed the dishes, the Roomba carried out its chores, and I played video games.

My wife commented on the unevenness of our chores due to the Roomba, and I suggested a compromise. If she rinsed the dishes and filled the dishwasher, I'd run it. She frowned, saying all I had to do was press a button. I nodded. She was right, of course. In a sudden fit of madness I said I'd cook a meal a week. She shook her head emphatically, refusing on the grounds that I might begin "providing" meals, as I had for my roommates long ago, and she had no desire to eat stale peanuts fingered by dozens of customers at a bar. I promised her that would never happen. With a great deal of unwarranted reluctance she agreed to my offer, pointedly staring at me while using steel wool to scrape a miniscule piece of hardened food from a plate.

I activated the Roomba and embarked upon the next leg of a multi-tier quest in World of Warcraft. The reward was a special recipe for Sleeper Sushi that would increase my mastery wielding a sword. First I needed to level up my in-game cooking skill. I decided against informing my wife of this vital chore. Keeping certain things to oneself contributes to a happy marriage just as much as telling lies. She has never once suggested I bathe with regularity or put in less time playing WoW. For my part, I can rise from a deep REM sleep and compliment her shoes. *They're cute!*

The following day while my wife was conveniently gone from the house (she leaves every day; where does she go?) I applied myself to the dual tasks of cleaning and cooking. The dishwasher gets very hot, so it seemed reasonable that I could steam some items, even bake, or perhaps boil them. I experimented with eggs in a seal-tight canning jar, the kind with a built-in rubber gasket and locking lid. In one jar went an egg, intact in its shell. I cracked another egg and dumped its contents into a second jar. Next came the crucial decision of placement—top rack or bottom. I initially reasoned that since heat rises, the top would be better for cooking, until recalling my wife's insistence that Tupperware never goes on the bottom because it will melt. Therefore, I concluded, the heating element must be at the bottom. I carefully placed my egg jars on the lower rack and turned the machine on. Then I set the Roomba going. With two machines working on my behalf, I had time to run a few quests in World of Warcraft.

Later I cleaned the Roomba hopper, marveling at the amount of dog and human hair, and checked my egg jars. The one inside the shell was semi-softboiled, which I considered less than a success. However the egg white-and-yolk in the second jar turned out pretty good. Next I tried a few baby potatoes in a separate jar. They didn't cook through and I started fresh by quartering the potatoes. At the last minute I decided to use the dishwasher to thaw out some frozen fish which was in a vacuum-packed bag. I placed several jars of potatoes and eggs in the machine and pressed the button, thinking that if my experiments failed, we'd at least have some pristinely cleaned dishware!

That gave me an hour and a half of video game time, which I confess did not go as well as I'd hoped. My avatar, Thorken the Paladin, "died" several times, which cost a lot of virtual gold in armor repairs. I didn't mind the expense, and my pride wasn't damaged by his repeated "deaths." What irritated me was the long run as a ghost from the graveyard to the corpse for resurrection. Worse, as soon as I returned to life, the same mob attacked me again. In my weakened state I died once more. After the third time I wondered if actually vacuuming or cooking might be more satisfying, but I quickly blocked that thought as immature. Instead I resolved to be a better corpse.

My wife tends to stack up errands when she goes out—taking on more and more, then later being exhausted, and often resentful of me for refusing to leave the house. Thorken had received gold and magical items for completing several quests, and I decided to grant my wife a similar reward for her errands, which could be regarded as a quest for dog food and household goods. I prepared a surprise meal: poached salmon, poached eggs, boiled potatoes, and extremely limp green beans. My wife was impressed, grateful, and complimentary. She didn't complain about the relative humidity of the house due to the dishwasher's steam and ate every morsel.

Afterwards she spent an inordinate amount of time scraping a piece off her plate, hardened to stone by five trips through the dishwasher. I considered making a joke about the plate being stoneware but knew such humor might fall flat. Instead I distracted her by mentioning dessert. I had an idea for baking a pie under the hood of my truck with the engine running.

RECIPES

DISHWASHER FISH

- Add oil and lemon.
- Wrap in foil and seal tightly.
- Place foil-wrapped fish in plastic bag, tape closed if necessary.
- Put in dishwasher.
- Press button.

DISHWASHER POACHED EGGS

- Crack egg and dump contents in a canning jar.
- Add water.
- Place in dishwasher.
- Press button.

HOLLYWOOD DESSERT

- Cut Slim Jims into inch-long pieces.
- Moisten pieces and dredge in flour.
- Fry at very high heat.
- Remove Slim Jim pieces and let cool.
- Drizzle with melted chocolate.
- Sprinkle with powdered sugar.

MONSTER

- Combine flour, baking powder, and salt.
- Beat in eggs and milk.
- Pour half the mixture onto a very hot pan.
- Brown lightly, then flip.
- Heat peanut butter until easily spreadable.
- Spread peanut butter and chocolate chips on pancake.
- Pour the rest of the batter on top.
- Flip.
- Cook, making sure the edges fuse.
- Flip.

SLEEPER SUSHI

- Flesh of 12 fat sleeper fish
- Flesh of 6 crescent saber fish
- If you eat for ten seconds you increase mastery by 125 for one hour.

The tempo of life here produces a

CLASSIC SOUND.

pretty. sweet.

Photo by Diane Kirkland







Whether it's Joe Burton blowing the trombone with Mudcat at Northside Tavern, a tour of Duane Allman's bedroom at the The Big House museum or a Friday night at the 40 Watt Club, there's always a memorable musical experience in Georgia. Learn about our legends, chart-toppers and signature events including Savannah Music Festival, Shaky Knees, Blind Willie McTell Blues Festival, Music Midtown, TomorrowWorld and more. Get information on artists and shows at **GeorgiaMusic.org**.

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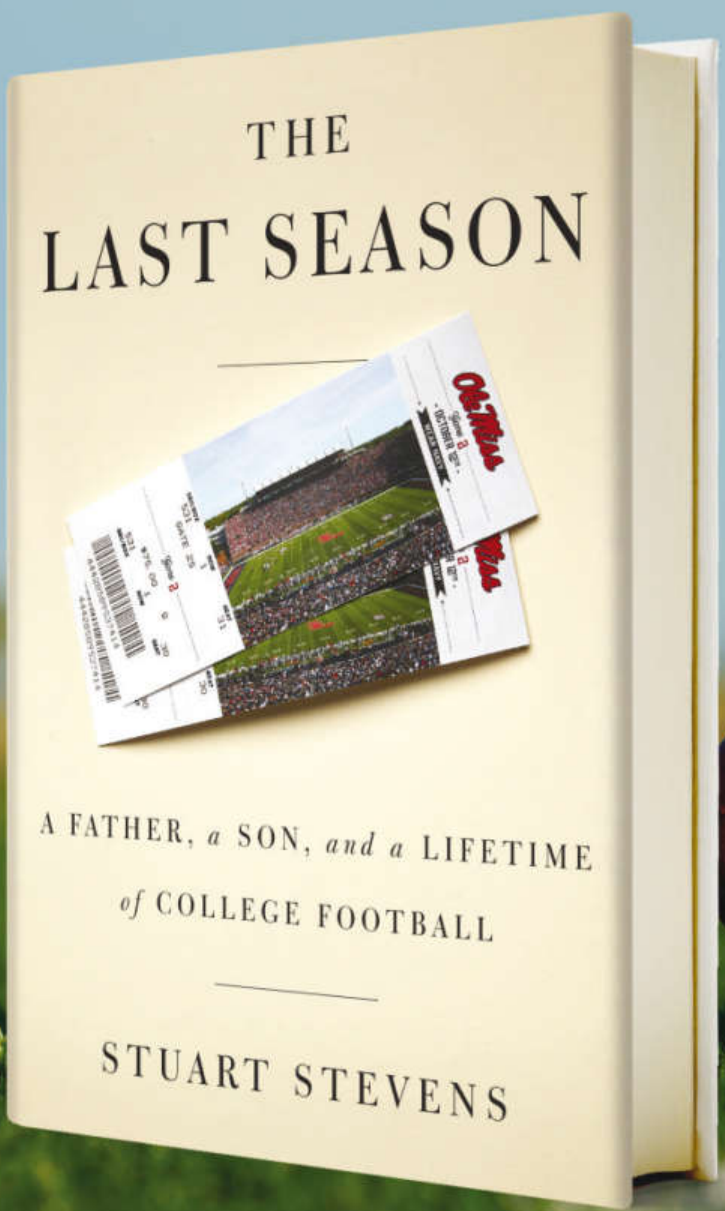
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★ FANNIE FLAGG ★





KNOPF | StuartStevens.com

Read a short passage from

THE LAST SEASON

by **STUART STEVENS**

The walk from the hotel to the stadium was no more than fifty yards. But as I was learning, these things took time. When I was in high school, I'd bought an old VW bus and when I asked the guy who sold it to me how fast it would go, he thought about it for a moment and just said, "Son, I'd leave early." It was that way with my dad. Better to leave early.

We were swept along in a crowd of Vanderbilt students and Ole Miss fans, all headed for the stadium. I wasn't sure we were going to the right gate and told my father, "Wait here. I'll go check and come back." He was looking around and didn't seem to hear me. In front of us were the brilliant lights of the stadium. The Vanderbilt band was playing what I supposed was the Vandy fight song. People were laughing and hurrying to the game in the warm night air.

I thought back to those times when I had first been initiated to the wonders of football by my father. Then I had been the one walking slowly while he patiently waited for me. But some things hadn't changed. There was the stadium out there, glowing, the crowds, the expectation that anything could happen tonight and whatever did, we'd talk about it all week. He was still my father. I was still his son. And we still had this thing we loved to share.

"It's one of the best father-son books I've read in years."

★ PAT CONROY ★